014
REKI KAWAHARA abec bee-pee
SWORD ART ONLINE
Alicization uniting

「知らないし、興味もないよ」
ユージオ§ キリトがこの世界で出会った最初の住人。
幼馴染みの少女アリス・ツーベルクを取り戻すため、
キリトと共に《セントラル・カセドラル》
最上階に到達したが……
「ユージオ……
お前は、お前にその技を教えた人のことを、
憶えているのか」
キリト§ 謎の《仮想世界》アンダーワールドに迷い込んだ少年。
この世界から抜け出すため《セントラル・カセドラル》
最上層を目指す

「こ……これが……!?」
「リリース・リコレクション!!」
最高司祭 アドミニストレータ
≪アンダーワールド≫にてシステムコマンドの概念を独学で理解した賢い者なる素質を持った少女。
現在は≪セントラル・カセドラル≫最上階に住む≪人界≫の支配者
「まさか……!」
アリス・シンセシス・サーティ
ユージオが追い求める少女。
しかし現在は≪シンセサイズ≫の儀式を経て、≪アドミニストレータ≫に仕える整合騎士となっている

「戦えよ!! 傷をぜんぶ完璧に治してから、俺と戦え!!」
「僕の……剣は、もう折れて……しまったよ」

100F
≪神界の間≫

96~99F
≪元老院≫
VS チュデルキン

95F
≪晩星の望楼≫

90F
≪大浴場≫
VS ベルクーリ・シンセシス・ワン

80F
≪雲上庭園≫
VS アリス・シンセシス・サーティ

≪セントラル・カセドラル≫最上階

≪アンダーワールド≫の≪人界≫と呼ばれる世界の支配者、最高司祭≪アドミニストレータ≫の居住階。
≪セントラル・カセドラル≫九十九階からは昇降盤で行き来し、この最上階には南側の床から入ることになる。
広大なドーム状の部屋は九十九階よりも一回り広く、差し渡しは四十メル程度。
部屋はぐるりと硝子窓に囲まれており、夜になれば満天の星空を見渡すことができる。
硝子窓は≪黄金色の柱≫によって支えられていて、それぞれ巨大な剣を模した飾りが取りつけられている。
純白の天蓋の各所には小さな水晶が嵌め込まれ、さらに一面に神々や巨大な竜、そして人間たちの細密画によって神話の絵物語が表現されている。
床には絨毯が敷き詰められ、中央には≪アドミニストレータ≫が就寝するための大型の円形ベッドが据えられている。

イラスト／来栖達也

Prologue

The integrity knights. Also known as, the integrators.

Possessing exquisite swordsmanship and sacred arts of the highest order, they were the mightiest masters capable of utilizing the «armament full control art» as they wished.

Despite having protected the Human World's law and order, and with such, the Axiom Church's rule, for three hundred long years, the entire size of the knight brigade was astonishingly small. As the name of Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one, appointed to the position barely a month ago, indicates, they numbered merely thirty one in total.

However, that fact only served to underline the integrity knights' strength and the fright they inspire, not undermining it in the slightest. Even in numbers that pale when compared to even a full raid group in SAO or ALO, they continued repelling intruders from the vast Dark Territory encircling the Human World.

I—Kirito, once called names like the «Beater» or the «Black Swordsman», now an elite swordsman-in-training studying at the North Centoria Sword Mastery Academy, stood up in challenge against these integrity knights, the strength of each rivalling many men, with just a single long sword at my waist and my bosom friend as my partner. The battle broke out through unexpected developments involving being arrested, imprisoned, and breaking out, rather than having initiated it on my own, but now that I'd turned my sword on the Axiom Church, the organization unequivocally accepted as the rulers, the only path left was simply to advance.

The «Frost Scale Whip», Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one.

The «Conflagrant Flame Bow», Deusolbert Synthesis Seven.

The «Heaven Piercing Sword», Fanatio Synthesis Two, and her subordinates, the «Four Oscillation Blades».

The «Fragrant Olive», Alice Synthesis Thirty.

Driving away the integrity knights with their mighty weapons, known as divine instruments, by the breadth of a hair, I had single-mindedly continued climbing up the grand staircases of the Axiom Church Central Cathedral, but naturally, that path would have been impossible with my own strength alone.

The black sword carved out of a branch of the «demonic tree», the Gigas Cedar, over an entire year by Sadore, a craftsman in Central Centoria.

Cardinal, the sage who granted me respite with a place to rest, food, as well as extensive information regarding this world and the armament full control art in order to oppose the knights.

And of course, Eugeo, my bosom friend who had always stayed beside me throughout these two years or so since we set out on a journey from Rulid Village—

I had taught him various sword skills for one-handed straight swords, what was now known as the «Aincrad-style Swordsmanship», but that pales in comparison to what I had received. After thrown into the Underworld from the real world without warning, I had only managed to survive in this alternate world where I couldn't make head or tails of anything, thanks to his assistance, encouragement, and guidance.

I was torn away from this peerless partner on the eightieth floor of the Central Cathedral. Only Integrity Knight Alice and I were hurled out from the tower through a large hole that opened up in the wall in the midst of our fierce battle.

Earnestly persuading Alice to sheath her sword and spending a night to climb that vertical outer wall, we somehow returned into the tower at the ninety-fifth floor. Climbing the stairs in pursuit of Eugeo who should have arrived first, we chased after a peculiar man who called himself the Chief Elder Chudelkin and reached the ninety-ninth floor—a floor away from the room of the highest minister, Administrator.

In that space occupied by nothing aside from the stairs proceeding onto the Chamber of Elders and the elevating disk rising towards the hundredth floor, I finally reunited with my partner.

But he was no longer the unassuming youth born in the outskirts who I knew.

He was the newest integrity knight, covered in armor of silvery blue, Eugeo Synthesis Thirty-two.

That was my bosom friend's new name.

Chapter 12
Highest Minister Administrator
5th Month of Human World Calendar 380

1

The Blue Rose Sword Eugeo held and the black sword I held drew out vivid streaks of pale-green in the dimly-lit space.

The trajectories were utterly symmetrical. Identical first steps and techniques—that might have been only natural as we had both invoked the dashing-type sword skill, «Sonic Leap», but our timing were completely identical: the time the sword points passed through the peak of their trajectories, the time the gleam grew strongest to signal that the strength was at its maximum, and the time the silver and jet-black blades rushed into each other.

I wasn't mindlessly using the skill. The methology in kicking-off, the orientation of my body, and the motion of my arm accelerated the sword skill threefold.

Despite that, Eugeo's «Sonic Leap» didn't lag behind mine by even a tenth of a second. In other words, he had accelerated the skill to its limits as well. And I hadn't even taught him everything about the technique yet.

Eugeo must have been steadily and stubbornly swinging his sword without my notice. Hundreds and hundreds of times, day after day. Until he could hear the «voice» of his beloved sword.

"……How."

I forced a low voice out as the crossed swords struggled fiercely.

"How could you lose to something like the «Synthesis Ritual». Wasn't all that sword training… didn't you set out from Rulid and target Central Centoria to take back your precious childhood friend, Alice?"

"……"

Receiving my sword without surrendering even a single step back, Eugeo kept to his previous words, “I have nothing more to say to you”, making no attempt to move his sealed lips. I thought I saw a faint, lambent light deep in his green eyes the moment he heard Alice’s name, but a dense darkness instantly consumed it. Or perhaps that, too, was an illusion brought forth by the pale-green glint the two blades continued exuding.

If this balanced situation continued, a super-high speed battle at close range would probably begin upon the end of «Sonic Leap» in several seconds. There would be no further allowance to be lost in thought. I had to put my all into thinking with the meager time I had left.

Integrity knights are created through what is known as the «Synthesis Ritual», effectively the direct manipulation of a soul. To be specific, the fragment of memories most important to the target would be extracted and a «piety module», a false loyalty, would be buried in its place.

Integrity Knight Eldrie had his mental state disturbed the instant he heard his mother’s name and the piety module in question almost fell out from his brow. That essentially meant that the highest minister, Administrator, had stolen the memories concerning his mother to make him an integrity knight.

The other integrity knights should have had their important memories robbed in the same manner.

It was probably memories of his wife in the past for Deusolbert. I had nothing to base a guess on for Deputy Commander Fanatio and Knight Commander Bercouli, but I suppose the chances of it being family or a loved one were high.

In that case, who was in the memories stolen from Alice… the golden integrity knight watching over the one-to-one combat between Eugeo and myself?

The most likely seemed to be her actual little sister, Selka, who should be now living in Rulid Village. Alice showed an intense reaction the instant a mention of Selka slipped out from me during our intermission on the terrace built against the cathedral’s outer walls. Her tears fell when she found out about her little sister and that even led to her determination in opposing the Axiom Church.

However, Alice’s piety module showed no sign of unrest even when she heard Selka’s name. I still lacked the information to know whether that was due to her six years of being an integrity knight or if those stolen memories weren’t of Selka.

Anyway, supposing all of those conjectures were true.

Who was in those memories the highest minister, Administrator, stole from Eugeo?

The circular elevating disk, used by Chief Elder Chudelkin to escape above and called back down by me, stayed immobile a short distance from us as we crossed swords. That left a hole of one meter straight above in the ceiling. I believe the highest minister's room should be beyond that, but I couldn't see through the pitch-black darkness blocking it off. Even if Administrator were to lie beyond that hole, I couldn't sense her presence.

However, Eugeo was «synthesized» by the highest minister just an hour ago there—in other words, he had the memories of the one most precious to him stolen. Who was in there?

Only one answer came to mind. It couldn't be any other than the girl taken away by Knight Deusolbert before him, whose traces he had always been chasing after since eight years ago, Alice Schuberg—now known as Alice Synthesis Thirty.

But in that case, why would Knight Eugeo, engaged in a sword fight with me this instant, not show any reaction at all even after seeing Alice a mere ten meters away?

Eldrie had his piety module nearly removed from simply hearing his mother's name. If that instability arose from the shortness of time he had spent as a knight, it wouldn't had been strange if Eugeo, for whom it had only been an hour since, exhibited more severe «symptoms» than Eldrie had, at the sight of Alice.

And yet, Eugeo's heart remained completely shut away before my eyes. If it wasn't the memories of Alice that were pilfered, just who or what had Administrator removed from his—

The sword skills' luster vanished from the two crossed swords the moment I thought that far.

Losing the momentum from the system assist, the white and black blades firmly rebounded from the recoil.

Both Eugeo, with his facial expression still static, and I, with my teeth clenched tight, raised our swords high while the orange sparks still lingered.

"Ooohh!"

"…!"

Our battle cries, both loud and silent, surged forth as we swung our swords diagonally down from the right in an utterly identical motion. Clashing, the repelled blades were next drawn into horizontal slashes from the right. Sliding the blade away when they entwined, I swung it diagonally down from the left. This, too, was met with firm resistance.

Surprise overwhelmed me yet again even as we proceeded onto our second confrontation.

The swords were of the same grade, but the wielders weren't of the same condition. In contrast to the light clothing I wore, top and bottom, Eugeo was in thick plate armor. Despite being clad in equipment weighing several times mine, his slashes weren't even a tenth of a second slower. Did becoming an integrity knight improve his strength or was it that «incarnation» thing at work, that which Alice spoke of right before the fight?

I am aware a system, unexplainable by the logic within the numerous VRMMO worlds I had experienced thus far, exists in this world. The power of incarnation, the power to image; that unseen power could even bring about phenomena beyond the capabilities of high ranking sacred arts (system commands) at times.

Despite how Eugeo should have his memories and emotions completely sealed away upon becoming an integrity knight, his willpower had been sharpened to an icy edge. That much was clear with how he had moved the Blue Rose Sword I carried into his own hands at the start of the battle, with what seemed like telekinesis—though Alice had called that an «incarnation arm».

What remained within Eugeo's mind now? Was his strong determination to retrieve Alice from the church the driving force behind him becoming an integrity knight, but in turn, caused some sort of will to lodge itself within the humongous void left behind after those memories were stolen?

I don't believe that was a loyalty towards the Axiom Church and the highest minister who forcibly overwrote his soul, neither do I want to believe so. The Blue Rose Sword receiving my black sword without even the slightest quiver couldn't possibly be supported by such a false will.

In his eyes, frigid as ice, there was still something burning fiercely on. I believe so.

And speaking of methods to awaken that, there would be only one—

"…Eugeo."

Pushing the sword back with all the strength I could muster, I whispered.

"You might not recall as you are right now… but we hadn't ever had a serious fight yet, have we?"

"……"

His eyes that once shone a brilliant green appeared navy blue without a light residing in them. Focusing hard into their depths, I continued.

“I thought about it many, many times while we travelled to Centoria from Rulid or even after we entered the capital’s academy. If we were to cross swords for real, who would win? …Honestly speaking, you’ll surpass me in time, that’s what I thought.”

Eugeo took my gaze on without blinking even once—no, he was shutting me off. In his eyes right now, I was nothing more than an intruder he had to get rid of. He would cut me the instant he spots the slightest opening. However, I believed my words would reach his shut heart, even if only a single fragment that made the trip, and I pitched the end of my words.

“…But it’s not time yet. You can’t beat me as you are now, after forgetting about me, about Alice, about Tieze and Ronye, and about Cardinal too. I’ll prove that to you right now.”

I held my breath the moment my words finished and set the strength gathered from over my entire body onto my sword.

Faint wrinkles settled in Eugeo’s brow as he attempted to repel my sword.

I immediately pulled my sword back in a single motion then.

Gyarin! The blades slid and gave birth to a streak of sparks in the dim darkness. I was pushed backwards while Eugeo pitched forward.

If I held my ground here, Eugeo would get a strike in after a short pause to recover his posture. I fell over onto the ground, back first, without fighting the momentum. I saw Knight Alice’s right arm reach towards her left waist in the corner of my vision. I guess she must have judged that I had lost and intended to draw her Fragrant Olive Sword, interrupting the duel.

But that verdict was roughly three seconds too early. The result will be decided by the outcome of my scheme—or by Eugeo’s level of familiarity with the Aincrad style.

I sharply raised my right foot right before my back slammed into the ground. A dazzling radiance shone from the tip of my boot and illuminated Eugeo’s face from below.

“Ooohh!”

Letting out a short roar, I drew my body in as I spun. Aincrad-style «Martial Arts», the backflip kick technique, «Gengetsu (Crescent Moon)».

This skill that could be activated even while falling backwards had saved my life on numerous occasions in the old SAO days. Though I hadn’t used it at all after being inserted into the Underworld, be it for actual fights or practice, the motion was ingrained in my body. And most importantly, Eugeo hadn’t seen this skill before.

But on the other hand, I had taught him «martial arts» involving the fists and shoulders. Eugeo had shown talent in those as well, being able to achieve even the third hit of the advanced «Meteor Break» skill that included tackles and slashing attacks, let alone the simple thrusting skill, «Senda (Flash Hit)».

My «Gengetsu» would probably be dodged if he had found out about kicking techniques through his own research or if he had guessed that they might exist. And the opening left after this kicking technique was tremendous if dodged. I couldn't avoid getting cut if I missed.

—It's on, Eugeo!

Yelling internally, I swung my right foot towards my partner's gorget.

Eugeo's two eyes remained filled with a torrid chill even in this situation. Twisting his upper body with that unchanging expression, he tried to dodge my kick. However, he was still falling forward from our previous clash. His unguarded lower jaw drew in the tip of my boot, enveloped in a light effect.

"-h…!"

A sharp cry came from Eugeo's mouth.

The Blue Rose Sword gripped in his right arm growled as it moved sideways. But no slash could hope to rival my kick's speed. If I just ignore that and focus on my……

No.

Eugeo wasn't aiming to counterattack. He wanted to intercept my right foot, not my body, with the sword's pommel rather than its blade.

Hitting with the grip, backhanded. A practical technique that shouldn't exist in the Underworld where swordsmanship emphasized beauty and gallantry. Even in my old SAO days, only those used to fighting humans would use this technique.

«Gengetsu» would have its trajectory diverted if he hit my kicking foot from the side.

So, what should I attempt?

"——!"

Grinding my teeth, I desperately tried to draw back my right foot as it shot out. But the skill would be fumbled if I pulled back too far here. Slowing it down by what felt like half of a half-second, I let Eugeo's right hand take the lead.

——Now!

Gashiin!!

A booming impact roared out.

Rather than its initial target, Eugeo's throat, «Gengetsu» got the back of his right hand that held onto the sword. I couldn't hope for much damage to his fist when it was equipped with a gauntlet as tough as the other integrity knights'. However, that impact sufficed for my plan.

Eugeo's right hand shot up and the Blue Rose Sword in his hand was went flying as well, revolving as it soared, stabbing itself into the marble ceiling.

Catching that sight in the corner of my darting vision, I tightened the grip on my black sword in preparation for pursuit upon landing from the backflip.

My right sole, with traces of the light effect still trailing after it, touched down onto the floor. Bending my knees, I absorbed the impact and kicked off with all I had, without any concern for restoring my posture. Digging my left foot in with all my might, I targeted the unarmed Eugeo's breastplate, letting out a «Slant», a one-hit sword skill that cuts up towards the right from the left—

"——!?"

What I saw, when I tried to recover my posture on the verge of falling forward while activating a sword skill, was Eugeo's left hand thrust out towards me and the points of green light gleaming on those five fingers.

It happened immediately before my sword dug into that glittering breastplate.

"*Burst element*."

The quiet invocation left Eugeo's lips. The points of light—the five «aerial elements» detonated simultaneously, bringing about an explosive gale that swallowed me. The wind pressure released caused no damage on its own, but I completely lost my footing, flung away like a rag.

"Guohh…!"

Groaning, I spread my arms wide and desperately tried to regain my stance. Slamming my head into the wall at this momentum would probably take over a tenth of my Life. Somehow stopping my body from spinning as I was tossed about by the tempest, I turned my two feet towards the imminent wall.

A brutal shock shot up through me the instant I landed, piercing through the top of my head, and I withstood the numbness in my entire body as I momentarily stayed glued onto the wall before falling on the floor. Upon jerking my face up, I saw Eugeo had been also pushed close to the opposite wall by the wind, expected as it was, but it appeared the weight of his armor might have been what allowed him to stay on the ground. Calmly standing upright from a squat, his face still maintained that maddening lack of emotion.

A soft voice reached me from the right upon getting up after him.

"…Is that truly Eugeo, your partner?"

The one who asked was Alice who watched over the battle from the wall at my request. I glanced at the female knight clad in gold for a moment, then replied in a whisper as well.

"What do you mean? Weren't you the one who said he was synthesized?"

"That certainly is true… I can't find the correct words, but…"

What Alice said after that rare mumble betrayed my expectations.

"That person is far too used to battles for one that just made it as, no, for one that was just made into an integrity knight. Even if we were to put aside the display of that «incarnation arm» before the battle and that aerial elemental art he had just used, I can hardly believe he is a novice."

"…You don't just get skills like that by becoming an integrity knight?"

I only wanted to confirm, but a harsh rebuke immediately flew over from the side as expected, and instinctively made me cower despite the current situation.

"The skills of a knight are not so easily acquired! We grasped the key to secret moves and sacred arts only through a lengthy period of self-improvement, let alone the incarnation techniques and the armament full control art!"

"R-Right. …But, then, what was that earlier…? Eugeo shouldn't have been able to generate five elements on a single hand yet at his…"

"That is why I had turned the question to you. Is that truly Eugeo?"

"……"

I pursed my lips and stared at the knight of bluish-silver who had started casually walking towards me.

Living on the hundredth floor of the Central Cathedral straight above this one, the highest minister, Administrator, was a preeminent sacred arts user on par with Cardinal, the sage in the Great Library Room. Someone capable of those terrifying arts to manipulate human memories like her might even be able to prepare an imposter utterly identical to the original in looks. But—

"…He's Eugeo."

I muttered hoarsely.

Even without the light in his eyes, even without the blood coursing through his cheeks, even without that smile on his lips, that integrity knight was definitely my partner and bosom friend, Eugeo of Rulid. I had made many mistakes since arriving in this world, but I could say that with confidence.

I did not understand how he could use techniques that surprised even Alice, the one ranked third in terms of ability, immediately after being made into a knight. And in the first place, I didn't even know why did the forced synthesis that should have taken three days and night end in less than an hour.

But regardless of how peculiar the situation was, I have only one task to do now that it had come to pass.

To stake all of myself onto my sword and attack. That was all.

Taking in a deep breath and expelling it, I tightened the grip on my black sword. Perhaps he sensed my fighting spirit, but Eugeo stood still in the middle of the hall and silently raised his right hand. The unseen «incarnation arm» drew out the long sword stabbed in the ceiling and returned it to its owner's grasp.

Yes—that proud Blue Rose Sword would never submit to an imposter.

Eugeo spun the extremely heavy sacred tool without much effort, and then settled into a proper middle-level posture. Upon seeing his posture, lacking any sort of opening, Alice whispered softly.

"Shall I serve as his opponent?"

"Don't be silly."

After an immediate rejection, I held my beloved sword forward as well. Even if they had both lost their memories of one another, Eugeo and Alice were still childhood friends raised in Rulid Village. I couldn't possibly let those two fight, and more importantly, waking Eugeo up was my role.

Despite how she had gotten so incensed over me calling her an “idiot” while we hung off the cathedral’s outer wall, Alice simply took a step back in silence this time and folded her arms before her chest. In reply to this display of knightly consideration, to not act even at the risk of me getting slashed, I spoke.

“…Thanks.”

I shifted my thoughts after that short muttered response.

Forget everything unnecessary for this battle. Become one with the sword and go forth, expending all of your abilities. You couldn’t possibly defeat Integrity Knight Eugeo otherwise, neither could you reach your best friend’s heart beyond that thick armor.

The point of my black sword quivered audibly. It was as if the traces of that thunder roaring in the far-off skies on the day we set off two years ago had crossed time to arrive at this moment.

—I’m counting on you, partner.

—I’ll be sure to give you a name when the battles are all over… so lend me your strength.

Praying to my beloved sword in my right hand, I took in another deep breath and jolted to a stop.

The noise, the environment, and even the heat and cold disappeared off in the distance. Nothing existed in this world aside from my black sword and me, the Blue Rose Sword and Eugeo. I had dreaded, and awaited this instant in the depths of my heart since two years before.

—Let’s go, Eugeo!!

I violently kicked off the ground, screaming without a sound.

Eugeo kept still with his middle-level posture and awaited my assault.

Petty tricks wouldn’t work on Eugeo as he was now, capable of freely bending the Aincrad-style swordsmanship and high ranking sacred arts to his will.

Dashing fifteen meters in an instant, I let loose an downwards slash from the right with the momentum from all of the speed in my charge.

In turn, Eugeo let out an upwards slash from the right with both hands after a step forward that very nearly cracked the floor.

The blades of black and silver clashed, emitting a dazzling flash in return. Judging that it wouldn’t turn into a match between sword skills at this range, I shifted my left hand onto the

pommel as well. Giving myself to the heavy sword's moment of inertia, I took the shortest path to draw it into an overhead stance.

"Ooohh!"

I swung down, expelling what remained of my breath into a yell.

If the swords' specifications and the swordsmen's capabilities were on the same level, a fully powered vertical slash couldn't be completely parried with a side or diagonal slash. He could only choose from two possible options: to strike it back with the same technique, or to escape from the sword's reach.

However, Eugeo's sword had veered right from the earlier strike and couldn't be raised yet. In addition, his body's weight was inclined towards the right, so he couldn't leap back immediately. This time, I'll be sure to—!

Abandoning all hesitation that could dull the deed, I swung my sword.

The black sword tip took the top of Eugeo's shoulder, protected by the bluish-silver armor.

No matter how high a priority they possessed, the integrity knights' armor weren't tough enough to repel a strike from a divine instrument without damage.

The sword ate into the armor with a shrill, metallic noise, swinging straight down, leaving behind only a moment of resistance. Light streaked straight through Eugeo, from his left shoulder to his chest.

A crash, like glass shattering, echoed out immediately after and the thick armor broke apart.

The small metal pieces scattered through the air were accompanied by a crimson mist. It didn't feel deep judging from the resistance, but my sword had cut into Eugeo's body at last.

I felt like I had been cut myself, in the same spot, the instant I realized that I had hurt my friend. My face warped, wanting to avert my sight, but I couldn't possibly stay my hand here. Flipping my wrist the moment the vertical slash reached the floor, I used the elastic energy from my entire body to follow up with an upward slash—

The black sword was flicked straight towards the side with a dull clunk.

Eugeo had kicked away my sword with his right greave, with nary a wince from the pain inflicted by that fresh injury from his left shoulder to his chest.

Realizing that motion would lead into a counterattack, I desperately leaned away my shuddering body. While the Blue Rose Sword whizzed closer from the left.

I staked everything on avoiding a direct hit on my neck, but it still tore straight through my left shoulder. Feeling a frigid chill rather than pain, my right foot kicked off the floor with all of my strength and I tackled Eugeo who had just swung his sword with my injured left shoulder.

The blinding, vicious pain that was previously absent surged through me this time as a spray of fresh blood whirled into the air.

Eugeo stood firm on his left foot beyond the red mist, refusing to fall.

An immediate counterattack would be impossible from that posture. I raised my beloved sword towards the right with a one-handed grip once again. A vivid radiance of pale blue enveloped the black blade.

Sword skill, single diagonal slash, «Slant». If this landed a hit on his right shoulder, Eugeo wouldn't be able to swing his sword, like he had thus far, with both shoulders hurt.

"Ra… aahh!"

It happened when I yelled as the attack initialized.

A scarlet flash shone from beyond Eugeo.

It was the light from a sword skill. But there weren't any in the Aincrad style that could hit while his right shoulder and back were open to me.

Even with my eyes opened wide with fright, I activated «Slant», no longer able to stop my sword.

Eugeo's body savagely spun anticlockwise a moment later. A horizontal slash approached from the left, leaving a red light in its track.

This sword skill… is a one-hit technique for two-handed swords, «Back Rush». A countering technique to spin around when an opponent had your back.

But I had never taught Eugeo such a technique.

The heavy impact blew those thoughts away in pieces. Eugeo's Back Rush and my Slant clashed and our swords were flung back once more.

The fresh blood from our left shoulders drew intermittent lines as Eugeo and I swung our swords straight up in the exact same motion as though we were drawn there together.

Deep blue light ran through the two blades.

The one-hit overhead vertical slash, «Vertical».

That said, the skill wasn't that strictly vertical. Vertical would usually incline by around ten degrees depending on the master hand's orientation and as such, the trajectories of the two facing off would cross if they activated it simultaneously, pushing both of them away upon clashing.

That occurred this time as well, but only half of it. The black sword and the Blue Rose Sword collided at around a third from their ends and let out dazzling sparks.

However, unlike back in SAO, there were occasions when that rebound didn't happen when sword skills clashed in the Underworld. It was likely due to the will to fight from both of us—what could be said to be the ability to image; incarnation—restraining the repulsive force.

The two swords, crossed as though they were devouring each other, let out countless orange sparks and blue beams of light. Eugeo and I started our third struggle, our swords and right arms creaking as we tried to complete our respective sword skills while facing towards each other at close range.

Staring into Eugeo's eyes beyond the scattered sparks, I asked through my clenched teeth.

"…Does that skill earlier have a name?"

Eugeo muttered with his facial expression calm, like a frozen water surface.

"…Baltoh style, «Head Sea»."

I couldn't immediately recall where have I heard of that style. I frowned, then finally realized.

The Baltoh style. That was the style belonging to the elite swordsman-in-training, Gorgolosso Baltoh, who Eugeo had served under as a valet trainee until the third month of this year at North Centoria Sword Mastery Academy.

The students of high class noble birth looked down on it as it was an uncouth skill structure without aesthetic sense, like the Serlut style of Sortiliena-senpai who I served, when compared to the Norkia and High Norkia styles.

But turning that around, that could mean it was practical in actual combat. Eugeo must have learnt the basic skills from Gorgolosso-senpai in the one year he served as his valet.

If that was the case, that revealed yet another conspicuous mystery.

"Eugeo… do you remember who taught you that skill?"

I asked again even while mustering all of my strength into the intercepted sword.

The expected reply came after a short pause.

“I don’t know, and I don’t care either.”

Despite how he should have been expending all of his power on it as well, both his voice and expression stayed frozen and barren.

“I don’t need to know anyone aside from that person. I hold my sword for that person, and I live on only to eliminate that person’s enemies…”

“……”

As expected, it seemed he had forgotten about not just Alice and me, but Gorgolosso-senpai as well. On the other hand, he remembered the skill’s name and how to use it.

If those turning into integrity knights were to have all of their memories reset, they would lose all of the sword skills they had trained, along with the sacred arts they had learnt. Hence, the highest minister, Administrator, developed that complicated method of handling it, the «Synthesis Ritual».

To block the target’s stream of memories, rather than erasing them all. I am unsure of the specific logic behind it, but it could be said to resemble retrograde amnesia, that so-called loss of memory, in the real world, where one loses memories of oneself and of the other people around, but maintains the aptitude for language and day-to-day life.

What served as the obstacle that cut off the stream of memories would be the piety module inserted into Eugeo’s soul—his fluct light. Who previously occupied the space that the module was now stuck in? If only I knew that, I might actually have a chance at pulling Eugeo’s eyes open……

No.

Words alone would definitely not suffice to break Administrator’s sorcery.

I had conversed with many people through our crossed swords since the day I became trapped in the floating castle of steel, Aincrad. Asuna, Suguha, Sinon, Absolute Sword. Even after coming to this world, there were Sortiliena-senpai, Head Elite Swordsman-in-training Uolo, and the knights, Eldrie, Deusolbert, and Fanatio. And Alice who looked on at this battle from behind.

Swords in virtual worlds possessed more meaning than being mere polygon objects. As one’s life rested on the sword, what resided within the blade had what it took to reach the

opponent's spirit. A sword free from hatred could transmit feelings exceeding what words could convey at times. I believe that.

The virtual blue light covering the two intersecting swords dimmed as it begun to lapse.

I had to muster every last drop of my remaining strength here and now.

To project all of myself to my friend's heart.

"Eu… geo———!!"

I swung my sword with a scream the instant the sword skill ended.

A strike with all my might. Repelled. Eugeo's slash. Repel it with the sword's base. Our feet stayed still as we continued swinging our swords at the shortest range possible. The sword fight gave birth to a continuous stream of clashes and sparks, filling our surroundings with noise and light.

"O…oooo——!!"

I roared.

"Se… aaaa——!!"

Eugeo, too, let out a cry for the first time.

Quicker. Accelerate quicker.

Eugeo accompanied me in the unceasing, instinctual exchange of attacks, lacking all style, all skill, all tactics, without missing a beat.

I could feel an unseen shell breaking apart each time we crossed swords.

My lips formed into a rough smile without my notice. Yes, Eugeo and I must have fought, no, played with swords in a reckless way like this, long ago. It wasn't in the training arena at the Sword Mastery Academy. It wasn't during the trip towards the capital either. Right, it was at the grasslands and forests near Rulid Village… with homemade wooden swords that had what looked like fur growing on them as our toys… where we single-mindedly attacked each other, calling it sword-fighting practice, like children would…

Had Eugeo and I done such a thing after our first encounter slightly more than a couple of years ago?

What was breaking apart… was my memories……?

Gakii——inn! An intense metallic noise rang out and broke me out of my momentary trance.

Meeting at a miraculous angle, the black sword and the Blue Rose Sword repressed each other's might and quietened down as they crossed against each other yet again.

"……Eugeo…?"

In response to the whisper that escaped my mouth.

Eugeo's lips replied with the faintest motion.

I couldn't hear his voice, but I understood. The integrity knight with green eyes had murmured my name.

Defined wrinkles were carved into his white, smooth brow. His teeth clenched tight beyond his barely opened mouth, grains of faint light blinked in those eyes sunk in darkness.

Those eyes caught sight of Knight Alice standing by the wall behind me from over my shoulder.

His lips quivered once again. Uttering Alice's name soundlessly.

"Eugeo… do you remember now, Eugeo!?"

I cried out in a daze. My sword slipped from the momentum and I was pushed backwards, unable to hold up against the Blue Rose Sword's pressure.

I should have been full of openings as I tried to regain my footing to avoid falling over, with my posture mostly crumbled. But Eugeo stood still with his sword raised midway instead of pursuing me.

Finally coming to a stop after retreating near Alice, I took in a deep breath of air and called out my close friend's name as loud as I could.

"Eugeo—!!"

The knight shook with a startle and slowly lifted his face that was turned down.

His complexion was unchangingly pallid, but it certainly possessed what qualified as emotion. Confusion, unease, regret, and longing… a faint smile, like the multitude of emotions frozen by the art had made the thick shell of ice quiver by even the slightest bit.

"……Kirito."

After a short pause.

"Alice……"

My ears couldn't have been lying this time. Eugeo's voice had called out our names.

It reached. My sword had reached his heart.

"Eugeo……"

I called out again and the color in his lips that formed that smile deepened.

He spun the Blue Rose Sword held in his right hand into a backhand grip. Lowering his arm, he stabbed its tip into the marble floor. The bluish-white blade wrapped in a faint mist sank around two centimeters into the floor with a distinct clink.

Taking that as a proclamation to end the battle, I lowered my black sword as well. Letting out the breath stuck in my throat, I took a step forward with my right foot.

However.

A series of unexpected incidents happened in next moment.

"Kiritoo!"

Alice was the one who screeched out my name from behind. I didn't know when she got so close, but she wrapped her left arm around me from behind and lifted my body up high.

More words flowed out from Eugeo's mouth in that same instant.

"…«*Release recollection*».

That incantation.

The true essence behind the Underworld's mightiest combat technique, the «Armament Full Control Art» that could awaken a weapon's memories and reveal its paranormal power—«releasing its memories».

The Blue Rose Sword emitted dazzling flashes of blue and white light.

I could neither dodge nor defend. The absolute chill spreading out with the sword as its epicenter instantaneously plunged the entire wide hall in ice. The opening to the stairs going down in the corner of the floor and the elevating disk that could ascend to the hundredth floor were covered in thick ice along with Alice and I both, up to our chests, rendering us utterly immobile. If it wasn't for Alice bringing my body up, my head would have likely been devoured by the ice as well.

We had encountered Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli Synthesis One frozen up to his neck like this at the large bath on the ninety-fifth floor of the cathedral.

I didn't look down on Eugeo's Release Recollection art after it froze that bath, humongous enough to be mistaken as a pool, filled with hot water at a speed that even the strongest and oldest knight couldn't escape from. But there was no water at all to freeze here on the ninety-ninth floor. I could still understand if there were numerous cryogenic elements around, but just where was all of this ice from?

No, that wasn't what I should be surprised at.

Why would Eugeo do this? He should have regained his memories, so why would he have to bind Alice and I in ice?

Enduring the chill coursing through my whole body, I desperately forced my voice out.

"Eugeo… why……"

Slowly picking himself up around fifteen meters away, Eugeo shortly whispered with a melancholic smile on.

"…Sorry, Kirito… and Alice. Please, don't come after me …"

And the young man who was my closest friend and Alice's childhood friend drew the Blue Rose Sword from the floor and walked towards the elevating disk in the middle of the hall.

The marble disk was thickly covered in ice like the stairs going down and us, but it began its ascent, spilling fragments of ice as it went, after the knight atop lightly nudged it with the tip of his sword.

The smile formed by Eugeo's lips, seemingly repressing many things, remained until the hole that opened in the ceiling swallowed it up.

"……Eu… geo—!!"

My desperate call was drowned out by the dull noise made as the elevating disk was assimilated into the ceiling.

2

Remove core protection.

Eugeo understood in that moment he finished reciting that incantation he had never heard of before, consisting of merely three words. He understood that he had unlocked a door that should have never be opened.

It was an hour before that confrontation with Kirito, one he could have never even thought of.

Upon bringing the fight against the integrity knight commander, Bercouli, and his terrifying ability to «sever the future» to a hard-fought draw by freezing them both with the Blue Rose Sword's Release Recollection art, the unconscious Eugeo was brought to the Central Cathedral's hundredth floor by the small, eerie man who called himself the chief elder, Chudelkin.

There, Eugeo met a girl possessing hair and eyes of pure silver, and a beauty beyond the potential of humans—the highest minister, Administrator. The girl spoke to Eugeo whose consciousness remained hazy.

—You are a potted flower, deprived from the water of love from one and all.

—But I am different. I will grant you my love, all of it for you.

—All you have to do, is to love me in turn.

The girl's words bound his mind as well as an art would. Absorbed, Eugeo voiced out those three spell words as requested.

That was likely the forbidden art to unseal the door guarding what truly mattered to humans… one's memories, thoughts, and soul.

With a pure smile, Administrator stared into and groped about Eugeo's mind, deeply thrusting in «something» chillier than even ice.

And once again, his consciousness cut.

Eugeo then regained his sight, his eyes opening as though dragged out from a pit of darkness by the cries from someone far away.

There were dazzling sparks and a silver blade. And a young man with black hair engaged in a fierce sword fight with himself.

Eugeo understood in that instant. He understood that he, clad in an integrity knight's armor, was pointing his sword towards the companion he trusted over all other and the childhood friend he cared for over all other.

Even then, the frigid thorn stabbed into the core of his mind did not disappear. That thorn relentlessly demanded that he cut down the enemy before his eyes for the esteemed Highest Minister and shackled his thoughts.

Unwillingly, Eugeo activated the Blue Rose Sword's Recollection Release art and confined the pair precious to him in ice. That was all he could do to bring the battle to a close as he struggled against the thorn.

…I had lost to Administrator's temptations and broke down what should have never been broken.

…But there is still something I can do… something I have to do.

"…Sorry, Kirito… and Alice."

After giving his all to force those words out, Eugeo stepped upon the automatic elevating disk. To return to Administrator's room on the cathedral's hundredth floor.

The elevating disk came to a solemn silence as the moonlight from a gigantic window shone against Eugeo's armor and the sword in his right hand, scattering specks of dim, white light.

It was roughly two o'clock, after midnight, on the twenty-fifth day of the fifth month.

Up until three days ago, he would have been long asleep at such a time in his bed in the expert swordsmen-in-training's dormitory. He would have been deep in slumber from the classes and training of each day, impossible to wake until the bell to rise from bed rang.

Come to think of it, he was in the academy's discipline chamber for the twenty-second's night and the church's underground jail on the twenty-third; hardly conducive for a good night's sleep. Despite how he should have reached his limit with the fatigue accumulated from the consecutive battles after escaping from the jail on the twenty-fourth's morning, and how the mere thought of that weighted down on his body, the icy thorn still stuck in his mind throbbed as it kept away his drowsiness as much as he would have liked to embrace it.

Present all of yourself to the esteemed Highest Minister. Fight to protect the Axiom Church.

The order conveyed each time the thorn—likely the same as the violet crystal prism stuck in Eldrie's forehead—throbbed was as strict as a steel whip and as sweet as the finest honey. It would probably be impossible to retrieve his sense of self after tasting a lick of that honey once more.

The only reason he could remain himself now must be thanks to being wakened up by Kirito's desperate cries and that sword fight he fought with all his might.

And he could only return to this room without suffering any great injury thanks to how Alice had watched over their battle without interrupting.

Integrity Knight Alice's swordsmanship and her armament full control art that could change her sacred instrument, the Fragrant Olive Sword, into a storm of golden flowers still concealed enough might to suppress Eugeo in his current state. If Alice had drawn her blade and fought alongside Kirito, Eugeo would have probably been cut down without given the time to regain his sense of self.

He did not understand the exact reason why Alice had decided to oppose the Axiom Church despite being a knight. Kirito's persuasion might have succeeded like he imagined while climbing the cathedral's stairs, or perhaps something even more dramatic had happened.

Alice's right eye was wrapped by a bandage that seemed to have been made from cloth torn from Kirito's clothes. The same as what had happened to Eugeo when he pointed his sword towards Humbert Zizek at the Sword Mastery Academy must have occurred. Her right eye must have ruptured upon being burdened by the serious crime of opposing the church. The one who gave Alice, who appeared utterly aloof when she arrested them at the academy and faced them again on the eightieth floor's «Cloudtop Garden», that determination was not Eugeo, but Kirito…

—But I have no right to speak about that now.

—After all, I had lost myself in Administrator's sweet words and thrown open the door to my mind. That was an act of betrayal towards Kirito and Alice. It was an act of betrayal towards Tieze, Ronye, Frenica, Gorgolosso-senpai and Sortiliena-senpai, Azurika-sensei the dormitory supervisor, Sadore-san the craftsman, everyone from Wolde farm, Selka, Garitta-san, and Chief Gasupht from Rulid, and the small sage from the Great Library Room, Cardinal, too.

Tightly grasping the sword grip in his right hand, Eugeo endured the icy throbbing as it gradually grew.

There should not be much time left for him to remain truly conscious. He had to amend for his crimes before he disappeared.

There was no other way.

Raising his face, Eugeo slowly looked around.

Perhaps the ninety-ninth and hundredth floor had their center at different positions, but the elevating disk Eugeo was aboard ceased movement at the south end of the floor. Stars filled all of the entire sky visible beyond the glass windows surrounding the room. The aligned pillars fitted with huge, decorative swords glittered as the light from the moon and stars shone upon them.

And—

Eugeo turned his gaze up as though someone had called out to him.

The illustrated story of the gods was depicted on the pure white ceiling over ten mel above just as before. Small crystals were inlaid on the gods, gigantic dragons, and humans, unblemished as they emitted light.

…What called out to me were those lights…?

It was when Eugeo focused on one of those crystals.

An actual voice came from a different direction this time. He quickly turned his face towards the front.

A circular bed, likely above ten mel in diameter, was set in the middle of the wide room. Its insides could not be seen through the hanging curtains thoroughly surrounding it. But he could hear a faint voice passing through the thin, pure white fabric. Its saccharine reverberations seemed to be of song or murmur.

It was Administrator's voice, the highest minister's.

It seemed she was chanting an art, but it lacked the vicious rhythm of an offensive art. If that was one needed as a sort of scheduled ritual, this would be a good chance.

Sheathing the Blue Rose Sword in its scabbard, Eugeo laid it on the ground, then took off the silver armor broken during the battle with Kirito. Upon stripping off the gauntlets, body armor, and mantle, he returned to his previous shirt-and-trousers outfit and softly touched his chest, affirming **its** presence.

He took a step towards the curtains, and then another.

A small shadow tottered out from the bed with unsteady steps. Accompanied by an unpleasant laughter.

“Hohi, hohihi… I thought you did a good job, scraping through for five or ten minutes, but to think you would return alivee. Looks like I have a winner on my hands heree.”

Eugeo’s breath stopped the moment he saw the person whom the moonlight fell upon. He desperately held his expression back from stiffening.

Ill-fitted clothes, deep red on his right and deep blue on his left. With the middle of his chest, swelling out like a balloon, misshapenly patched together.

Eyes as thin as thread and a mouth pulled into a great smile on a round, pale, and blank face. His bald head lacked that golden hat, but there was no mistaking this bizarre appearance.

The chief elder, Chudelkin. The man who appeared just as the battle between Eugeo and Knight Commander Bercouli was about to conclude, the one who turned the knight commander into a lump of stone with that «*Deep Freeze*» art and likely brought Eugeo up to the hundredth floor here after he lost consciousness.

Despite his short and comical appearance, he was likely the arts user possessing power second to only the highest minister among all in the Axiom Church, the one who presides over trials with utmost cruelty. Finding out about his memories returning, even if it was only temporary, would likely prompt him to instantly use that terrifying petrification art. He could only struggle through this without drawing suspicion if he were to fulfil his final role.

Chudelkin gave the armor Eugeo had taken off, lined up on the floor, a glance before exaggeratedly raising his two eyebrows consisting only of mere strands.

“Oh myy, you sure have done a number on this armor Her Eminence had bestowed upon youu. You… haven’t just ran back here after getting beaten to a pulp by those traitors, have you, number thirty twoo?”

Her Eminence likely refer to Administrator, and the traitors would be Kirito and Alice, while that number thirty two would be Eugeo's «number» as an integrity knight. Anything he said in this situation would only serve to increase his suspicion, but he had no choice but to answer when asked.

Steeling his determination, Eugeo opened his mouth, giving his all to keep his expression still.

"I had confined the two traitors in ice, Your Excellency, Chief Elder."

In response, Chudelkin's entire face lit up with a smile while the tiny pupils within his two arching eyes emitted a cold light with absolutely no aura of mirth.

"Oh, really. Confined them in ice…? That's all very nice, but you have finished them off, have you not, number thirty two?"

"……"

He floundered for an adequate answer in that instant of silence.

Of course, he had not finished Kirito and Alice off. The Blue Rose Sword's armament full control art was one constructed with the aim of sealing an enemy's movement without harm. Even when sealed in thick ice, their Life would hardly fall as long as they kept their heads out.

Would it best to reply with an affirmative, rather than revealing the truth? But that lie would be immediately exposed if he went to check the floor below. If Kirito was here, he would definitely ad-lib an appropriate reply with his innate intuition and pluck.

—I had always been hiding behind Kirito. Depending on my partner upon encountering trouble, leaving the important decisions to others.

—But I can only think and decide for myself now. It's not like Kirito got through all those problems with his intuition alone. He only got me this far after thinking very hard to arrive at the right choices.

—Think. Like how he would.

Forgetting even the frigid throbbing still in his mind for the moment, Eugeo thought. And his mouth opened and replied at the lowest volume he could muster.

"No, I had not finished them off, Chief Elder. I was instructed to detain the traitors by the esteemed Highest Minister's command."

He did not know if he actually had received such an instruction from Administrator.

However, as far as he could fuzzily recall, the chief elder was absent when he first woke up in this room. If he had not been present when Eugeo was turned into an integrity knight, Chudelkin should not be capable of judging the contents of the command, and not to mention how he could not possibly overturn the highest minister's words.

Of course, it would be all over if the person herself, in the bed around ten mel away, heard this conversation. However, the girl seemed to be reciting some sort of art beyond those layers of curtains that could very likely muffle a whisper.

Still restraining his inner worries from showing on his face, he awaited Chudelkin's response and—

The fat lips of the small man in the jester outfit greatly distorted as they let out a voice that rang of anger.

"No good, that's no goood, number thirty two."

The index finger on his right hand shot out before Eugeo's face—

"Make sure you call me Your Excellency, Chief Elder, when you're addressing me. Your Excellency, you hear? Guess who's becoming a horsey as punishment the next time he forgets to add Your Excellencyy? I'll be on your back with you down on the ground, going yee-haw, yee-haw, hohihihii."

Shrill laughter spilled from him before he quickly pressed his two hands to his mouth and peeked towards the bed. After confirming the highest minister's art was continuing without pause, he patted his chest in an exaggerated motion and sneered once again.

"…Now I must get going to my own orders from Her Eminencee. I'll have to *deep freeze* all the rotten knights defying the church at once as Her Eminence's grand will decreees. Oh, and you shall await further orders there, number thirty two. I can't enjoy myself to the fullest with a burden weighing me down, you seee, ho, hohoho."

Forcing down the revulsion welling up from his chest, Eugeo nodded.

Chudelkin danced towards the elevating disk on the southern corner with an unsteady gait. He must be planning to humiliate Kirito and Alice before turning them to stone like what he had done to the knight commander, Bercouli.

However, there was no need to worry about the two—probably. After all, the «ice jail» brought forth by the Blue Rose Sword was utterly useless before Knight Alice's armament full control art.

Eugeo had trapped all of Alice in ice on the eightieth floor, the «Cloudtop Garden». However, the Fragrant Olive Sword she held split into countless small blades and swept out, immediately shaving through the ice.

They might have already escaped from the ice by now, and even if they had not, Alice had no need for mercy in using the might of her sword in response to Chudelkin's arrival.

Chudelkin leapt onto the elevating disk, breathing hard with that odd laughter, and headed down. Eugeo awaited with his breath silenced and an empty elevating disk soon returned, assimilating with the floor like before. The chief elder must have made the disk ascend with plans to enjoy himself in that shut space. That denied him the means of ascertaining the situation on the ninety-ninth floor.

—That's fine. Those two would never be done in by the chief elder.

Stifling his unease with a deep breath, Eugeo returned his sight towards the middle of the room.

Raising his left hand, he pressed it down onto his chest from above his shirt once more.

—I have my own role to play.

He rallied his spirits, picked up his sword, and began walking forward. He approached the bed, three mel, two mel, one mel; it happened then.

The art incantation that had continued unceasingly thus far stopped and vanished as though it had been drained elsewhere. His instincts froze his feet and Eugeo pondered.

Was the art completed or did she stop upon noticing Eugeo's approach? In the first place, what sort of art was the highest minister chanting?

He quickly scanned through the surroundings, but the room stayed as it was. Likely measuring over forty mel across, the circular room was a size wider than the ninety-ninth floor, but the furnishings were limited to the large bed, the carpet spread over the floor, and the ten-odd pillars shaped after greatswords supporting the surrounding glass windows. The golden pillars merely glittered quietly as they went against the moonlight, with no sign of anything else making an appearance.

Abandoning his investigation, Eugeo turned back towards the bed. The core of his mind throbbed sharply in that instant.

The cold pain was gradually intensifying. There must be not much time left for him to retain his own consciousness. He had to do what he had to do before he became an integrity knight in both body and soul.

The bed was within his arm's reach after a few more steps forward and he softly laid down the Blue Rose Sword gripped in his right hand after a brief hesitation. His unease and forlornness heightened the moment his beloved sword left his hand, but he could not have Administrator bear the slightest distrust towards him.

After lifting himself and taking another deep breath, he called out with a prayer for his voice to not tremble.

"…Esteemed Highest Minister."

A silence of a few seconds, which felt like several times that, lapsed and that voice replied.

"…Welcome back, Eugeo. It appears you have taken care of that errand, haven't you."

"…Yes."

He replied in a monotonous murmur. Acting was never his forte, but he had lived in Rulid Village for years while stifling his emotions. He simply had to return to back then. To the self from back then, before he met that mysterious black-haired youth.

"Good boy. You deserve a reward, Eugeo. Come closer onto the bed."

An appeal, syrupy with tenderness, came from beyond the curtains.

Touching his chest once more with his left hand, he gently pulled apart the seam between the curtains surrounding the bed. He could not see far beyond there, engulfed in a violet darkness, but a familiar, cloying scent drifted as though it was drawing him closer.

He climbed onto the smooth sheets of white silk, then crawled forward, bit by bit. It should be only five mel until the center of the bed, even if it was on the large side, but he could not see anything no matter how much he moved his limbs, neither did his fingertips came into contact with anything.

However, she would notice his cognizance if he became flustered and raised his voice here. Focusing entirely on the texture of the sheets, he advanced.

Suddenly—

A pale light came into existence without a sound from somewhere slightly above.

The pure white radiance was neither that of a candle nor a lamp. It was a light element generated by an art though he hardly caught its incantation. Drifting breezily, the light orb kept away nothing more than a little of the murky darkness.

Having lowered his gaze, Eugeo found a smile from «that person» two mel ahead and opened his eyes wide for an instant. Erasing his expression in the next, he gave a low bow with both hands still down.

A girl draped in a thin violet fabric with her long, silver hair streaming over that. The one who ruled over the Human World, the one who possessed transcendental beauty with eyes, like opaque mirrors, that denied access to her heart.

The highest minister, Administrator.

Slovenly sitting atop the sheets, the girl whispered while her eyes stared into Eugeo, gleaming silver from the element's light.

"Now, come closer, Eugeo. I will give you what you seek as we have promised. A «love» devoted to you and only you."

"……Yes."

Responding extremely quietly, Eugeo gradually sidled towards to the girl with his body still bowed low.

He would lunge at the girl upon getting one mel away, preventing her mouth from chanting arts with his left hand and drawing «that» out from his chest to stab into her with his right hand. Everything would end in less than two seconds, but even that seemed far too long when up against Administrator.

A pain, sharper than before, ran from his forehead to the core of his mind the moment he affirmed his opposition against the highest minister once more. However, he could not show concern over that. Loosening as much strength from his entire body as he could, he slowly, slowly approached—

"…But before that…"

Administrator whispered all of a sudden with Eugeo a mere ten cen away, bringing him to a rapid stop.

"…Please let me take a good look at your face once more, Eugeo."

Did she feel his malice? But if she had, there would be no use pouncing onto her. He could only follow her words for now.

Eugeo gently lifted his body with his expression still frigid and looked into the girl's face.

He thought to not let their eyes meet at least, but those two specular eyes had an irresistible allure that drew Eugeo in. The eyes that did not betray what lay beyond them, yet peered deep into all who looked into them, glimmered bewitchingly under the sacred art's light.

The girl moved her petite lips at the end of several seconds that felt like an eternity.

"…I did insert the module into the gap in your memories that was previously there because it was most ideal, but I suppose sloth might not have been the best idea…"

Eugeo could not immediately understand the true purpose behind her murmur, partly directed towards herself.

Previously there—in other words, that meant Eugeo had a part of his memories missing before he was brought to this room? However, Eugeo was utterly unaware of any such blanks in his own past. He might precisely not notice it himself as it was a «gap in his memories», but the sage, Cardinal, certainly did mention this.

The fragment of the target's most precious memories must be removed in order to embed the piety module. That would usually correspond to memories of the person most beloved to the target.

Recalling that brief moment in the hidden Great Library Room that seemed ages ago, Eugeo muttered in his heart.

……The person most beloved to me. That's Alice Schuberg, taken away by an integrity knight before my eyes on that day eight years ago. I have never forgotten about Alice even once. I can remember her golden hair glittering under the sun, her azure eyes, more so than the skies in the heart of summer, and her sparkling smile just by closing my eyes.

……And it is different from love, but I have a partner just as important as Alice now. The mysterious youth I met in the forest south of Rulid two years, two months ago. The «lost child of Vector» with black hair and black eyes like those from the east. My closest friend, Kirito, who dragged me from the village and guided me to the Central Cathedral. I can still vividly visualize his impish smile.

……Alice and Kirito. I might never be able to see their smiles again. But even if I were to lose my life here, I will never forget those two until my final moment.

……I wanted to return to Rulid Village with them after Alice had taken back her memories… but I no longer have the right to wish for that. I, who had lost myself to Administrator's temptations and directed my sword towards those two, more precious than any other.

As his thoughts drifted there once more, Eugeo's eyes quivered ever so slightly.

He did not know how had Administrator interpreted that expression, but she inclined her head lightly and spoke.

"So it is a little unstable after all. I suppose there is no helping it, I will have to synthesize you once again. You can have your reward after that, Eugeo."

And she carelessly reached out with her right hand.

It might have been a good opportunity to act, but the instant her slender fingertip pointed towards his forehand, an unforeseen phenomenon assailed Eugeo. His entire body went numb with even his mouth paralyzed, let alone his limbs.

And in the next moment—

A strange sensation went through his head, from his forehead to the back.

The source of that cold throbbing, the icy thorn embedded deep in his head, was dragged out slowly but forcibly. Pain was absent, but his sight flashed white each time the thorn moved, granting him vision of a hazy scene.

Verdant branches rustling in the wind. Labile sunlight filtering through the trees.

Running through under those with smiles all around.

Golden hair glittering in the light a short distance beyond.

And jet-black hair frisking about energetically by his side.

The young Eugeo ran as he turned his sight towards the right. But his other childhood friend's smile lurked deep within a white glare—

A pronounced, intense shock dragged Eugeo back onto the dim bed.

A strange object rose from Eugeo's forehead as his numbed body greatly bent backwards. A transparent triangular prism illuminated in purple.

Integrity Knight Eldrie, too, had acted strange as a similar triangular prism protruded out from his forehead the instant he heard his mother's name in the battle in the rose garden. However, the prism from Eugeo's forehead appeared to be larger, carved in a more intricate pattern, and emitted a stronger glow.

Assailed by the astonishment behind how such a huge foreign object was embedded in his own head and the fear of Administrator's sacred arts capable of such a feat, Eugeo simply watched on in silence.

"Yes… you simply have to stay still like that…"

The silver-haired girl gently whispered and stretched her right hand further, slowly drawing out the violet triangular prism from Eugeo's head. His thoughts went white the instant the foreign object left and Eugeo slumped onto the bed as his strength left him too.

The highest minister lovingly gave the triangular prism, supported by her fingers of both hands, a glance as she spoke.

"This module is an improved variant completed just recently. I tried to include not only loyalty towards the church and me, but the circuits to strengthen your *imagination* too. You will immediately be able to use the power of incarnation the moment you are synthesized with this, even without that ineffective training. That is still restricted to the basic techniques for now, but…"

Eugeo could not understand more than half of Administrator's words.

However, one thing stood clear. That triangular prism, the «piety module», had taken over Eugeo's thoughts, turned him into an integrity knight, and made him point his sword at Kirito and Alice. Of course, he was the one who chose that path, but he could now play his final role without interference from that false loyalty with the module removed. Now that he thought about it, the throbbing that remained in the core of his mind and was cold as ice had vanished as well.

However. The numbness throughout his body, that had assailed him the instant Administrator pointed her finger at him, showed no sign of fading even with the module removed. He was still unable to move his body as he desired.

If only I could move my right hand. I could grab that from my chest and swing it down on Administrator, if only I could do that—

As Eugeo desperately mustered together his strength, looking downwards with his back arched, that white right hand reached out once again.

He stared with upturned eyes and the highest minister, with her left hand holding the module, came closer until their knees almost touched. The girl pulled his head towards herself with a gentle smile and Eugeo pitched forward, unable to resist even that meager strength.

Having placed Eugeo's head, turned sideways, on her two bent legs, Administrator caressed near the borders of his hair with her fingers as she whispered.

“Let me have another look at your memories. I will definitely embed this in the place you treasure most this time. Your head will no longer hurt after that. And that is not the end… you will be forever freed from those needless distress and agony, along with your hunger and thirst too.”

The slender, pale fingers left his forehead and slowly fell lightly onto his lips. The numbness faded from his mouth alone.

Her fingers left and the girl showed a charming smile as she commanded.

“Now, recite that art I taught you earlier.”

“……”

Eugeo’s lips slightly trembled as they, and they alone, regained the ability to move.

The haze in his memories included not only the exchange of swords with Kirito as an integrity knight but the moments directly before that too, but the three words he had recited alone stood out vividly in his memories.

Remove core protection.

He could not even begin to imagine what these unfamiliar sacred words meant, but he was convinced of one thing at least. That short phrase would throw open what kept a human’s heart safe, the door bestowed upon each person at their birth.

That was why Administrator could freely peek through Eugeo’s memories and insert the piety module into a pre-existing gap. However, in Administrator’s words, the «synthesizing» was unstable, so she intended to repeat that.

Eugeo could maintain his own consciousness at the current moment, regardless of the risks, so that door to his heart must have been closed again. He did not know whether it closed by itself as time passed, or if Administrator had shut it for some sort of reason. However, Administrator needed Eugeo to recite those three words again in order to repeat the synthesizing.

If he recited them, Eugeo’s body and heart, too, would likely turn into those of an integrity knight this time, denying him his final wish of retrieving Alice’s memories.

However, if he did not, Administrator would notice Eugeo’s insubordination.

At this very moment. This moment with the highest minister revealing her defenseless, bare skin might be his final and greatest opportunity. He had to somehow move his right hand and stab that thing into her.

The highest minister had numbed Eugeo by merely pointing at him with her right hand. That was not all to it. He also did not hear her voice chanting the art when the light element floating above the bed was generated.

Eugeo had caught sight of a similar invisible power being used without reciting any words a short while ago, though of different type. Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli Synthesis One who he fought at the large bath downstairs. From Eugeo's point of view, the hero from ancient times, a founder of Rulid Village and his ancestor from far in the past, had drawn a sword left a distance away towards himself simply by holding out his hand.

That was not all. Now that he thought back upon it, the sage of the Great Library Room, Cardinal, had shut away the passage, brought forth a table, and accomplished other such acts with a single wave of her staff, hadn't she? Masters like them must be capable of exhibiting power equivalent to sacred arts simply by visualizing it in their minds.

Of course, for Eugeo who was still studying sacred arts at the academy mere days ago, he could not even match the ascetic apprentices serving the Axiom Church as an arts user, let alone Administrator and Cardinal.

He had to break through the numbness binding his body with the power of his mind.

Kirito had once said this. That what truly mattered in this world was putting something in one's sword. That could only imply how power born of one's mind could reside in one's sword, strengthening its attacks.

If the mind could strengthen one's sword, it could be applied to sacred arts… no, to any one of a human's actions as well.

——Move.

Separating his lips and gently taking in a breath, Eugeo wished.

——Move, please, my right hand.

——I had made many mistakes thus far in my life. I couldn't help Alice when she was taken away by that integrity knight, I didn't go and help her for countless years after that, and I lost sight of my path after I finally arrived at the final destination of my journey; I have to atone for my weaknesses.

"……Mm…"

A hoarse, low voice spilled from Eugeo's mouth.

"…Mm… ov…"

Administrator's smile faded as she looked on from straight above. Her two silver eyes narrowed as they considered Eugeo's intentions. There was no turning back. The power gathered from all about his mind concentrated upon his right hand.

However, the numbness refused to leave. Countless invisible needles pierced everywhere over his fingers and palm as through preventing him from further movement. This right hand could break apart for all he cared if only it could move for this instant. It would be fine even if he could never swing a sword again. So, just once more—

"…M, ov, e…!"

It was when he cried out in that strained voice.

A faint glow enveloped Eugeo's right hand, thrown upon the sheets. A warm, gentle radiance capable of dissolving any and all pain and anguish. It took only an instant for the ice needles stabbed into his bones and flesh to thaw.

"…You…?"

Administrator muttered and drew back.

However, Eugeo's right hand had already been freed from its numbness by then and slipped into his shirt, taking out something that dangled off a narrow chain.

A tiny dagger that gleamed in a deep shade of copper.

Held in a backhanded grip, it swung down into Administrator's pure white skin peeking out from the dipping neckline at the bosom of her flimsy garment.

It could not miss. The blade measured a mere five cen on the dagger, but a target that was practically within arm's reach could not possibly be out of its range.

However, in the very moment before its needle-like point truly pierced into Administrator's flesh, a phenomenon beyond his wildest imagination occurred.

Gagaan!! An impact resembling thunder roared out and concentric circles formed by membranes of violet light appeared with the dagger at their heart.

What made up those shining ripples were verses of sacred letters of an extremely small size. The thin membranes that seemed far too frail thwarted the sharp point of the dagger.

"Gu… uhh!!"

A powerful repelling force opposed Eugeo as he gritted his teeth and strained with all his will.

The dagger he held in his right hand was one of a pair given to them by the sage, Cardinal, with one entrusted to each of them. Though the dagger itself possessed nearly no offensive ability, Cardinal could send her sacred arts from the isolated library room to the one stabbed by it.

Eugeo's dagger was for putting Integrity Knight Alice to sleep.

And Kirito's dagger was given to him for defeating the highest minister, Administrator. However, he ended up using his dagger on Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio Synthesis Two to save her life after their battle on the fiftieth floor of the cathedral.

Cardinal's voice, conveyed through space, mentioned this at that time. [The possibility of Administrator still in her unawakened state is high at the present moment. If you reach the highest floor before that woman awakens, you could deal with her without using the dagger.] she said.

However, they were too late. With her now awake, there were no means of defeating the highest minister who possessed power equivalent to Cardinal's aside from the dagger Eugeo held.

He would retrieve Alice's memories and return to Rulid Village with her. That was Eugeo's only wish for the longest time. However, he felt he no longer had the right to hold on to that hope now that he had been deluded by the highest minister's words, put on an integrity knight's armor, and turned his sword upon Kirito—and Alice, too—even if it was only temporarily.

The means of redeeming for his error numbered only one.

That would be to abandon himself—to sacrifice himself for a greater good, rather than his personal desires; that was all.

At the tender age of eleven, Alice was taken from her home town and trained as a knight with her memories sealed.

Despite their unsullied records, Tieze and Ronye were humiliated through the privileges granted to nobles.

He would expend the rest of his strength to crush that twisted political system. Even if it took his death here to defeat the highest minister, the days he spent travelling to the central capital from the village and studying at the academy were not vain.

The dagger swung down with such determination, but it was still hindered by those purple membranes and failed to reach Administrator's skin. Meanwhile, the highest minister, too, had apparently failed to predict Eugeo's actions and threw her upper body back as a sharp breath escaped from her.

A light harboring indignation resided in her two silver eyes, opened wide.

Taking on that gaze, Eugeo placed his left hand against his right and tried to force in the dagger with what strength he had left.

"U… o-ooh!"

The fine, needle-like point pierced just a single millice into the intensely glowing barriers—when it happened.

The numerous sacred letters making up the barriers exuded pure white light as they exploded, blowing Eugeo and the highest minister away.

"…!!"

Even while he rapidly flew through the air, thrown off the bed in an instant, as though mowed down by a giant's palm, Eugeo still succeeded in two tasks.

He barely regained his grip on the chain with the dagger after it was flicked away from his right hand and grasped the Blue Rose Sword's scabbard, lying right beside him after his back was thrown against the floor, with his left hand.

Embracing his heavy, cherished sword had zero effect on reducing his momentum and he tumbled across the floor, coming to a stop only after slamming his back against the large window far away.

"Guhh……"

A short groan escaped from Eugeo even as he desperately brought up his face and stared towards the center of the room.

The flimsy pieces of cloth dangling from the high ceiling were all blown open, revealing the circular bed. Beyond them laid a human silhouette, silent and upright. Despite blown away by the exploding barriers like Eugeo, her long hair merely rippled gently, with no sign of injury left on her. The glimmer of the triangular prism extracted from Eugeo was visible in her left hand.

The violet, sheer fabric apparently failed to endure the blast and disintegrated as they were torn away, but Administrator lifted her right hand and fixed her ruffled, long, silver hair as though she found no need to pay any attention to her utterly unclothed body.

She softly sat down next, as if an invisible chair was present in the air, and crossed her slender legs. She silently moved through the air in that posture, stopping roughly ten mel away from Eugeo, on his hands and knees at the southern edge of the spacious room.

The highest minister placed a finger on her right hand on her chin atop the unseen throne as she stared hard at Eugeo. He stayed capable of neither movement nor speech and eventually, the silver-eyed girl showed a fleeting smile and spoke.

“I was wondering just where were you keeping such a trinket… but that is simply a ploy from that kid in the library room, isn’t it? To think she would *filter* it out from my perception; so she had thought up of a thing or two in the short while she stayed out of my sight.”

She let out an unrestrained, quiet giggle.

“But what a pity. I haven’t been sleeping this entire time either. That kid blundered when she thought to make that toy metallic. No metal object can hurt this skin of mine now, without exception. Be it that brutish blade of the ogres, or a marking pin from the sewing shops.”

“Wh……”

Still prostrate on the floor, Eugeo weakly moaned.

She was invulnerable to metallic weapons.

If that proved to be true, would it not render attacks from all sorts of weapons, including the dagger from Cardinal, powerless? The violet membranes that prevented the dagger’s point earlier was likely that defensive art, but Eugeo did not have the slightest idea of what sacred art could cancel it and he doubt he even possessed the capability for it.

Administrator gently whispered to Eugeo who was able to do naught more than desperately gripping the weapon small enough to be hidden in his right hand and looking up at the nude girl sitting in mid-air.

“What a pitiful child.”

“……”

“And I even promised you so. If you had given all of yourself to me, I would have granted you just as much love in turn. That eternal love, that eternal servitude you sought for so long would have been yours in just a little longer.”

“……Eternal love…”

Eugeo unconsciously repeated after her in a parched voice.

“Eternal…… servitude……”

The highest minister nodded, fiddling with the piety module she had just extracted from Eugeo’s forehead with her left hand.

“Yes, Eugeo. Entrust all of yourself to me and that thirst torturing you so will be immediately quenched. You will be freed from the relentless embrace of unease and fear. …This is your final chance, Eugeo. Crush the toy in your right hand with the sword in your left hand. I will pardon you from your sins with my boundless love then.”

“……”

Laid prone, Eugeo stared at the Blue Rose Sword gripped in his left hand and the reddish-copper dagger held in his right.

“Love is to dominate and to be dominated… —You’re the pitiful one here, being only able to speak of it in such a manner.”

“……”

The highest minister’s lips then shut.

With a single wave of that slender right hand, extremely highly ranked sacred arts would rain down and instantly erase his Life. Eugeo continued his words, still, aware of that fact.

“…I’m sure you were the same. You starved for love and sought it out… but no one offered you any.”

He murmured in the depths of his chest as he spoke on.

—I might have been a child unloved by even his own parents.

—But even so, I had definitely loved many people.

Old Garitta-san, the previous generation’s woodcutter. Sister Azariya from the church. Selka the sister apprentice.

My grandfather who had told me many old tales. My sister, Sulinea-san, who used to look after me when I was still a child.

Banou-san and Toriza-san from Wolde farm. Telin and Telulu, their twins.

Gorgolosso-senpai who trained me. Azurika-sensei from the dormitory.

Tieze who granted me her smile everyday as my valet, short as it lasted. Ronye who looked after my partner.

And Kirito.

Alice.

“You’re wrong, pitiful one.”

Eugeo stared into Administrator’s eyes, exuding a mysterious iridescent light, and deliberated on each word as he spoke them out.

“Love is not to dominate. It’s not to seek for something in return, it’s not something you can receive in exchange. It’s something to be given out freely, like watering a flower… that is definitely what love truly is.”

A faint smile appeared on Administrator’s lips once again when she heard those words.

However, it lacked that saccharine sweetness from earlier.

“……What a pity. To think my bid to pardon this boy, this great sinner who rebelled against the Axiom Church, and save his soul would end with such words spoken to me.”

Eugeo looked up, his breath taken away, as the silver-haired girl floating in mid-air transformed from a «human» to a «god» in an instant.

Nothing changed on the outside. However, an unfathomable intimidating presence—what felt like divinity, so to speak—enveloped her pale, almost transparent, skin. A manifestation of overwhelming might that seemed as though she could tear apart the most adept swordsman or arts user into fine pieces with a single wave of a finger.

“Eugeo… could you possibly be thinking… that I actually have a need for you? That I will hesitate to take your life because I desired you as a knight… or anything of that sort?”

The girl’s subdued smile expressed no emotion whatsoever. He could do nothing more than to keep a stiff, tight grip on the dagger in his right hand and to endure the sense of intimidation pressing down on him.

“Ufufu… I have no more need for a dull child like yourself. I will drain you of your Life, and perhaps grant you the honor of having your corpse converted into a tiny jewel, to be put away in a box. I could derive a meager bit of emotion whenever I see that, even after organizing my memories from today.”

Administrator spoke, her speech intermingled with laughter, and gently adjusted her legs while atop the invisible chair.

That was no empty threat. The highest minister probably could put her words into action without hesitation if she wanted to.

He could not escape now and besides, he had already lost all and any avenue of escape. It would be too late if he tried moving to the elevating disk to head downstairs. Even if he broke the glass behind him somehow, all that laid beyond that were the hundreds of mel of empty skies extending up from ground level.

Besides, Eugeo had chosen his own fate the moment he used the Blue Rose Sword's armament full control art on Kirito and Alice on the ninety-ninth floor. He would stab the highest minister with Cardinal's dagger even at the cost of his life.

The highest minister was protected by a barrier that prevented all metallic weapons. However, Eugeo felt that barrier was not as almighty as the girl had claimed. The barrier appeared to have self-destructed when he recklessly tried to force the dagger in earlier. He doubted that was the end of the art, but it presented the possibility that the dagger could reach her immediately after the explosion.

"My… are you not quite done yet?"

Looking down at Eugeo who crawled on all fours, Administrator whispered.

"What a gallant boy, willing to indulge me yet again in your final moment. …I wonder, would killing you and turning you into a jewel be too dull a choice? It might take some time, but perhaps it's better to synthesize you by force like that child…?"

Despite the precarious situation, a part of the highest minister's speech still caught Eugeo's ear and he unconsciously repeated in reply.

"…That child…?"

The silver-haired girl grinned broadly at that and nodded.

"Indeed. The one you were so infatuated with, *Thirty*-chan. That child hated reciting that art too, so I had the automated elders system spend several days to eliminate that *protection* by force. I didn't witness it because I was asleep, but it must have been truly excruciating. …How about it? How about having a taste of it yourself…?"

"……*Thirty*… …Alice…"

Eugeo called out that name in a hardly discernible manner.

As usual, he could not understand over half of the words from the highest minister's mouth. However, he understood this clearly.

The young Alice struck with a rope and taken to the Central Cathedral eight years ago had undergone atrocious treatment in the process of becoming an integrity knight. She had firmly refused to voice out the «remove core protection» verse, the one Eugeo had recited when he yielded to Administrator's temptations, and had the door to her heart forced open as a result. The pain of the injuries Eugeo received through his battles thus far must have paled in comparison to the suffering she had gone through.

He really could not possibly flee here.

He would not forgive himself if he fell before landing even a single blow on Administrator in return.

"……"

Firmly gritting down on his teeth, Eugeo lifted himself up with his trembling arms and wobbled as he stood up.

Staring back at the highest minister, whose eyes showed less amusement than before, he wrapped the dagger's chain around his right wrist and gripped the Blue Rose Sword's handle with that hand. Affirming the texture of the white leather that seemed to stick to him, he drew it out in a single motion and tossed the sheath onto the floor.

The blade gleamed bluish-silver against the moonlight flowing in from the window behind.

The girl sitting in mid-air ten mel ahead narrowed her eyes as though wary of that light and spoke in a voice colder than ever.

"I see, so that's your answer, boy. Very well… I shall spare you some mercy and kill you without any further suffering."

Raising her right hand, she pointed nothing more than her index finger towards Eugeo.

The highest minister seemed to have no need for words in her usage of sacred arts. However, there should still be two requirements to clear before she could carry out any offensive art.

Those would be element generation and processing. Be it thermal, cryogenic, or some other element, even a master would need two seconds to generate and shape them.

As such, Eugeo had already set up a stance with his cherished sword at his right shoulder by the time the highest minister began moving her right hand.

The Blue Rose Sword's blade was enveloped in a yellow-green glow.

Light blue points of light were created on Administrator's fingertips.

"O… ohh!"

This was his last sword. His last secret technique.

Eugeo kicked off the ground, perfectly aware of that.

Aincrad-style charging technique, «Sonic Leap».

Kirito's voice replayed deep in his ears.

—Listen here, Eugeo, secret techniques move our bodies for us. But we can't just let it move us as it likes.

—You have to become one with the secret technique and speed it up with how your feet and arms move. Your sword will reach the enemy faster than the wind if you do.

How many times had he practiced? How many times had he failed and plunged face first into a clump of bushes?

And how many times have he heard Kirito's voice laughing happily—?

Eugeo's sword gleamed verdant-green as it soared into the air, passing by even the sound of the wind being cut.

The smile vanished from the highest minister's lips and she extended her right hand.

The cryogenic elements, on the verge of being launched as ice needles, burst apart upon contact with the Blue Rose Sword. And immediately after, the secret technique with all of Eugeo's strength behind it crashed into Administrator's palm—no, the violet membranes that expanded five cen from her hand.

An impact and noise far beyond earlier assailed Eugeo.

The violet barrier, capable of obstructing all metallic weapons, caught the accelerated Sonic Leap, too, but ripples spread outwards on several of the thin layers of miniscule sacred letters as they trembled violently.

The barrier should explode like a few minutes ago if he continued driving it in with all his might. He would resist that pressure somehow and stab the dagger dangling from his right wrist into

Administrator for sure this time. He did not mind even if his body was torn into pieces as long as that succeeded.

“B… brr… eakk!!”

Eugeo yelled out as he put as much strength as he could muster onto the Blue Rose Sword that still retained its glow from the secret technique.

“……!”

The highest minister remained silent, but her lips showed no sign of cheer. Iridescent light swirled deep in her narrowed eyes as she grimly bent the five fingers on her extended right hand.

She must not be attacking with her left hand because it held the piety module. The reason why she held onto it despite saying she would kill Eugeo must be either because she still desired to turn him into a knight or because she had some other method of using it.

However, there was no use pondering over that. He had to succeed in this final attack—even if it took all of his remaining vitality and strength to do so—there was nothing more.

“U… ooooohh——!!”

It was when Eugeo strained out one last scream from the bottom of his abdomen.

An unforeseen phenomenon occurred before his eyes yet again.

The Blue Rose Sword slowly began to sink into the violet barrier.

The barrier had yet to disappear. Despite that, the point of his beloved sword certainly did tear into those sacred letters that should obstruct all metal, little by little—no, it was slipping right through.

It was no illusion. The highest minister and her widening eyes served as evidence.

The state of affairs accelerated suddenly.

Having taken on Eugeo’s sword in mid-air, Administrator strongly sprang back without warning.

The barrier swiftly retreated as well and losing its support, the Blue Rose Sword swung straight down with a sharp noise as its blade sliced through the air. Several mel of the thick carpet were cut apart in a straight line the moment the blade touched down.

He understood something had happened. All he knew for sure was that he would suffer from the highest minister's offensive arts if he stayed still. His limbs felt heavy, perhaps due to all that strength he had expended earlier, but Eugeo immediately kicked off the floor to follow up with an attack.

However, his enemy proved faster this round. The highest minister generated elements anew even while retreating and shot them towards Eugeo. The green points of light were already right before his eyes by the time he entered the stance for a secret technique.

Eugeo instinctively dropped the stance and guarded himself with the Blue Rose Sword. The aerial elements blew up with a green flash immediately after and the extreme gales they brought forth blew Eugeo to the southern wall once again.

It was likely fortunate that the highest minister had omitted the process of converting the elements. If she had used them as wind blades and the like, instead of unleashing them as pure elements, they might have even severed a limb or two.

However, he could not be said to be entirely lucky either. Instead of a flat glass window like earlier, his back slammed into the gigantic pillar connecting two such windows this time.

A decorative greatsword was fitted onto the pillar and Eugeo crashed into its body before rolling onto the floor. If the imitation sword had its blade, rather than its flank, pointed towards him instead, he might have suffered a severe wound even if it was only an ornament. Thus, he could also actually be said to be lucky in that sense, but he was in no condition to stand up straight away with the pain threatening to deny him from breathing.

—I have to move. A real sacred art will be coming for me next.

Speaking to himself, Eugeo desperately tried to raise his upper body.

The highest minister had apparently retreated beyond the bed and he could see no more than the glimmer of her silver hair within the dark shadows. Even Sonic Leap would not reach at that distance—but naturally, it was of no difficulty for sacred arts. Crawling on all fours like he was now would guarantee his death.

"U… ghh…"

He moaned as he managed to prop up his right knee somehow. However, he still lacked the strength to use that leg. It disobeyed his commands, doing nothing more than tremble no matter how hard he tried to stand.

—Not yet. It's not over yet. If I give up now, just what have I returned to this room for?

—No. Just what have I lived until this moment for?

“Gu… o-ohh…!”

Eugeo leaned his back against the golden imitation sword as he somehow pulled his body up, propping himself up with the Blue Rose Sword. It seemed he suffered not only bruises but gashes as well from the collision and his blood dripped ceaselessly onto the floor.

It must have taken over five seconds for him to stand up from his fall, but the highest minister had not followed up with an attack for one reason or another. Still floating about the darkness twenty mel ahead, she kept her silence.

Eventually, a quiet murmur drifted through the room; one audible only in the room filled with its absolute silence.

“……That sword… hmm, so that’s it…”

Still confused over the meaning of her words, Eugeo glanced down at his right hand.

The Blue Rose Sword thrust into the floor. The reddish-copper dagger hanging off his wrist. Which was “that sword” Administrator spoke of?

His intuition whispered to him that this was of utmost importance, but before he arrived at an answer—

The silence that filled the highest floor of the Central Cathedral was shattered by an odd cry from neither Eugeo nor Administrator.

“Eek, eek eeeeeeeekkk!!”

He looked towards its source and saw a circle in the floor sinking four or five mel away. That was the elevating disk connected to the lower floor. A voice, louder still, rang out once again from the black gap surrounded by the carpet.

“H-Hel-Heeelp meeee, Your Eminenceee, Highest Ministeeeeer!!”

That ear-piercing shriek could only belong to Chief Elder Chudelkin who descended towards the ninety-ninth floor slightly earlier.

Upon hearing his yells, interspersed with shrieks, Administrator stepped forward from the shadows without a sound, landing at the end of the bed, and muttered to herself.

“…How does he turn more infantile as the years pass by? I suppose it might be about time for a *reset*.”

Eugeo slowly retreated towards the western side of the room, building distance from the elevating disk, despite the watchful eyes of the highest minister who was shaking her head gently.

The disk's sinking, but it's hardly fast. It should take tens of seconds before it reaches the lower floor and brings Chudelkin back once again.

—Or so he thought, but two pale hands gripped onto the edge of that hole just as the gap between the floor and disk became a mere twenty cen.

"Hooooooohh!!"

The strange voice echoed out for the third time, followed by a round head appearing from the gap. With his bald head dyed bright red, without even a single strand of hair, the chief elder forced his body through and tumbled onto the floor with a pop.

His clothes appeared no different from what he wore when he went down after gloating over his authority to Eugeo earlier. However, his red and blue jester costume that swelled up into a circle was torn everywhere and shriveled up.

With a glance at Chudelkin who had flopped onto the floor in a sitting posture, breathing heavily with that unique laughter.

"…What is that manner of dress?"

Administrator spoke, with a chilly voice.

On the other hand, Eugeo also felt a sort of shock. The chief elder's limbs and torso peeking through the tattered jester outfit were as slender as withered branches. With his head swelled round despite that, he looked like a stickman from a child's scribbles.

So what exactly was with his jester outfit that was inflated so much when he first saw him at the large bath? While Eugeo was engrossed in that question, Chudelkin lifted himself up without even noticing Eugeo who stood mere mel away, stood at attention, and began his defense.

"I-I must apologize for the distress I must be causing you by exposing my insignificant self in such an unseemly state before Your presence, Your Eminence, Highest Minister, but this is simply an unfortunate consequence of the fierce battle I went through in my bid to slay the traitors and protect the honorable Axiom Churchh!"

Chudelkin streamed on and on before stopping at that point and his eyes went wide, from the shape of a crescent moon to that of a full moon, possibly having noticed the highest minister's

stark naked appearance. His two hands snapped over his face right after and his entire round head went red as he shouted out shrilly.

“Hauu!! Ohooouu!! Your humble servant is unworthy of beholding Your presence, Your Eminence, I shall have to smash my eyees and turn myself into stoneeee!!”

Even while talking on and on about how terribly undeserving he was, the gaps between his fingers widened as the two eyeballs beyond them gleamed brightly. It seemed even the highest minister found a need to respond to Chudelkin’s reaction as she covered her breasts with her left hand. Her voice, carried on frigid air, shot towards the jester.

“State your business now, or I really will turn you into stone.”

“Hooohh!! Hoaaa… aa… a-aahh…”

In the process of twisting his long and thin body while letting out that bizarre voice, Chudelkin froze still upon hearing the highest minister’s words. His head, flushed red, turned increasingly pale.

Turning about without warning, the chief elder hopped like a frog towards the hole in the floor he had just exited. The elevating disk was still down on the ninety-ninth floor and yet to return.

“W-We will have to seal this up at oncee! That pair, those demons aree-!!”

“…Were you not supposed to get rid of the rebels?”

Administrator asked and a jolt ran down Chudelkin’s back.

“Y- Yo- Yo-Your humble servant had undergone an epic battle of valor and courage, resulting in this unseemly appearance, but as the traitors were far too accustomed with the ways of cowardice, trickery, and craftinesss…”

Eugeo listened to the chief elder’s screechy screams and devoted the other half of his consciousness to thinking.

The «traitors» Chudelkin referred to were, of course, Kirito and Alice who Eugeo had encased in ice on the ninety-ninth floor. Though the chief elder was the second best sacred arts user in the church and their movements were restricted by the ice, he doubted they even had a chance of losing and as expected, Chudelkin had fled back after receiving a fierce counterattack.

However—that would essentially mean.

Eugeo unconsciously took a step or two away from the hole for the elevating disk.

Perhaps having heard the sound of his rustling clothes, Chudelkin switched from speaking of his incessant excuses to a glance in his direction.

His thin, drooping eyes opened wide once again. Thrusting a finger on his left hand at Eugeo, the chief elder gave a domineering shout as though he had forgotten about his own disgraceful sight.

“Hoaaa! Y-You, number thirty twoo! What are you standing around there foor! T- T-To think you could draw your blade in this «divine space» before Her Eminence’s presence, how could you, how could youu! Down, on your hands and knees, noooooooowww!”

“……”

But Chudelkin’s words hardly registered in Eugeo’s mind any longer.

What his two ears caught were the quiet vibrations coming from downstairs. The sounds the thick elevating disk made as it ascended with the power of arts.

Even the chief elder, entirely focused on showering him with curses, soon noticed those noises and firmly shut his mouth.

Spinning about, he got on all fours and quietly peeked into the hole in the floor.

“Hoaaaa——!!”

With his greatest shriek yet, he looked at Eugeo once more.

“N- N-Now, number thirty two! What are you waiting foor, hurry and head dooown! It’s all your fault in the first place, for not giving them a proper beatiing, none of this is my fault, Your Eminence, please, I plea you understand that fact at……”

Chudelkin’s intense, rapid speech streamed on as his right foot moved forward in a bid to return to the bed while on all fours—

But not before a hand extended from the hole in the floor and got a strong grip on it.

“Hohiiieeee——!!”

Screaming with his eyes wide open, Chudelkin swung about his right foot. The jester shoe with its pointy tip came off with that and his small frame tumbled away with the remaining momentum. Immediately getting onto his feet, the chief elder rushed towards the bed, turned over the dangling sheets, and snuck into the darkness in between them and the bed.

The highest minister standing on the other side of the bed silently looked down at the hole in the floor with a big smile instead, perhaps having lost her interest in the chief elder's idiocy. Eugeo felt he had to immediately slash at her if she shown any intention to attack, but for the time being, she seemed to be welcoming the new guests to her room without a word.

Upon confirming that, Eugeo returned his sight to the elevating disk.

The hand holding onto Chudelkin's shoe remained extended upright. The black sleeve slipped down, revealing an arm with muscles slender yet firm.

Just how many times had that arm pulled Eugeo up?

No, that hand had always been pulling him along until this day, this very moment. Even more so now, after Eugeo diverged from the path and pointed his sword towards the one that arm belonged to.

The elevating disk continued its ascent.

What appeared next was jet-black hair still ruffled from combat. Following that were two eyes, darker than the night sky visible beyond the glass and exuding a light stronger than those stars. And at last, lips showing a fearless grin—

"……Kirito…"

Eugeo's voice quivered as he murmured his friend's name. It should not have been loud enough to hear from over ten mel away, but as though it was only natural, his bosom friend still turned his eyes towards Eugeo, beside the wall, and nodded with that same, old smile.

It was warm, strong, and exactly the same as when they first met. The elevating disk made a dull, heavy noise as it came to a stop immediately after.

—Kirito… You are…

An emotion throbbed deep in his chest, one that he had no name for.

However, that ache was certainly not unpleasant. At the very least, it was a pain far more tender, doleful, and precious compared to the agony he felt in his head when the piety module was still in it.

With his eyes fixed on Eugeo who stood stock still, the youth clothed in black, who was his partner and mentor in swordsmanship, showed a cocky grin and spoke.

"Hey, Eugeo."

"…..And I told you not to come, too."

He somehow managed to reply with those words and his partner threw Chudelkin's shoe, still in his right hand, far away with a growing smile.

"Have I ever listened to your instructions like a good boy?"

"……That's true. You're always…… always going with……"

His remaining words faded away.

He wanted to atone for his sin of turning his sword at a friend with his life. He was prepared to stab the last hope, Cardinal's dagger, into Administrator even if it resulted in his body being torn apart. But he ended up reuniting with Kirito before he accomplished that mission in the end.

No, that was wrong. Kirito arrived here of his own will.

He had smashed through Eugeo's full control art, repelled Chief Elder Chudelkin, and came to the hundredth floor while Eugeo was still alive.

—That's right, I'm still alive. And the dagger is still hanging off my right hand. So it's time to fight. That's all I need to do now.

Eugeo moved his sight off his partner and looked towards the middle of the room.

The highest minister, Administrator, showed a broad, mysterious smile as she quietly stood still beyond the gigantic bed. Her two specular eyes hid her inner emotions flawlessly as they always did, the bluish-white moonlight wavering within them. All he could tell was that cogs were turning in her mind while she looked downwards upon any new visitor.

He had to tell Kirito before the battle resumed. That the highest minister's flesh was protected by a barrier that hindered all things metallic—and that it was unlikely invincible.

With his eyes on the highest minister, Eugeo slowly began to move towards his partner.

And suddenly.

He heard a light, metallic clank from there. He turned his eyes towards the right.

Another person walked out from the murky shadow cast by the pillar behind, by Kirito's right.

Golden hair and armor enveloped in an exceedingly noble radiance upon receiving the bluish-white moonlight. The Fragrant Olive Sword, a sacred instrument with a guard modelled after a flower, at the left of her waist. A white skirt fluttering gently.

It was the integrity knight, Alice Synthesis Thirty.

Eugeo's eyes reflected Alice, who had already been cooperating with Kirito on the ninety-ninth floor. However, the ache in his chest grew even stronger upon seeing the pair standing side by side. His foot that yearned to be by Kirito's side stopped at its own discretion.

Knight Alice first looked at the highest minister, then at Eugeo.

The black bandage was still wrapped around the right of her face. She should be capable of healing it instantly, as an integrity knight with skills equivalent to those of high ranking arts users; but she left it alone, perhaps to come to terms with that pain.

Eugeo stared into Alice's left eye, dyed in a deep indigo blue and coursing with various emotions. One that strongly exuded her inner thoughts as a human, unlike the ones filled with cold apathy when they met again in the garden on the eightieth floor.

Despite how she had yet to regain her memories as Alice Schuberg, Knight Alice's inner world had changed greatly in this short time. And the one who had brought about that was unmistakably the black-haired knight standing by her side. Kirito's words had reached that frozen heart of Knight Alice that seemed like it could never melt.

If—

If he returned that «memory fragment» Cardinal spoke of, stored somewhere in this room by the highest minister, to Alice's mind.

Knight Alice would instantly return to Alice Schuberg, Eugeo's childhood friend.

At the same time, Alice's personality as a knight, the personality that likely conversed with Kirito, sheathed her sword, endured the pain from losing her right eye, and firmly decided to fight against the Axiom Church with him, would probably disappear.

That was Eugeo's greatest hope and the reason he continued to fight. But how would Alice react to that fact? And did Kirito… truly hope for Knight Alice's annihilation despite saving Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio's life even after a struggle to the death with her…?

Taking in a deep breath and breathing it out, Eugeo forced those thoughts back.

He had to focus on this final battle now. He had the opportunity to consider various matters because Administrator had been watching over the situation in silence, but it would not be odd for her attacks to resume any time.

Taking his sight off Alice, Eugeo gazed further into the room once again and continued moving. Stepping onto the moonlight shining in from the windows behind, he carefully walked sideways and finally arrived at Kirito's side.

Kirito whispered to Eugeo, who leaned his weight upon his drawn Blue Rose Sword after thrusting it into the floor once more.

"You're hurt. They aren't… from me, right?"

"……"

In response to the words his partner spoke—willingly spoke to bring the battle downstairs to an end, Eugeo's mouth unconsciously slackened as he replied.

"Your sword didn't hit even once. I just slammed my back into that pillar a little."

"Then you should have waited for us to get here."

"…Hey, Kirito, I'm the one who stopped the both of you, you know?"

"As if we're weak enough to be stopped by just that."

Their whispered quarrel continued on and he felt as though they had returned to how they were before they were separated on the eightieth floor… when they still lived together in the Sword Mastery Academy's dormitory; the aching in his chest dulled by just a little.

However, there was no taking back what had already happened. His sins of losing himself to the highest minister's temptations and pointing his sword at his bosom friend were not minor enough to be wiped away by words alone.

Eugeo pursed his lips and tightly gripped his beloved sword's handle.

Kirito, too, gazed further into the spacious room for a while in silence, then muttered in a tense voice.

"So that's… the highest minister, Administrator, huh."

The one who answered was the knight standing on Kirito's other side, Alice.

"Yes. …She is exactly as she was, six years ago…"

Perhaps hearing the pair's exchange, the highest minister finally broke her long silence.

"My, my… it must be the first time I had so many visitors in this room. Goodness, Chudelkin, were you not the one who said you would handle Alice-chan and the *irregular* boy?"

The hanging sheets beside the bed were pushed up from inside at that, and out shot a large head and nothing more than that. Facing the wrong direction, Chief Elder Chudelkin scratched his forehead as he shrilly screamed.

"Hoh, hohiii!! Y-Your humble servant was reduced to this unseemly state after an epic battle of valor and courage and…"

"I've already heard that one."

"Hoaaaa! I-It was not my faaaauuult! It's because number thirty two went easy and covered less than even half of the traitors in ice, that's why… besides, number thirty, that crude, gaudy knight even went and used that Release Recollection art on meee! Of course, I am certainly not one that could get even a single scratch from that glittery girl's secret technique, hohihihii!"

"…That man is the only one I will definitely…"

Alice murmured in a voice filled with a cold thirst for blood. Paying absolutely no attention to that, Chudelkin spun about and looked up at Administrator, standing atop the bed, as his screechy voice droned on.

"In the first place, even number one and two were beaten downn! Their stupidity must infected number thirty too, yes, I am sure of ittt!"

"Hmm. …Stay quiet for now."

Chudelkin shut his mouth the instant Administrator said so and stayed still prostrate on the floor. But it appeared his two eyes were wide open, taking in the view of the stark naked highest minister without any sense of decency.

Despite saying she had no interest in the chief elder's deeds, Administrator stared at Alice with her silver eyes and inclined her head slightly.

"It was about time to *reset* Bercouli and Fanatio, but… Alice-chan, I hadn't used you for even six years yet, had I? I don't see any sign of *error* in your logic circuits either… I wonder, was it really the influence of that *irregular* boy, after all? How fascinating."

Eugeo understood nearly none of the words the highest minister spoke. However, the tone used by the silver-haired girl caused chills to run through him—as though speaking of domesticated sheep, or even of a tool.

“Hey, Alice-chan. You have something you want to tell me, don’t you? I won’t get angry, so go on, tell me.”

Administrator took a silent step forward atop the bed with a faint smile.

As though pushed back by an invisible wall, Alice took a step back.

Eugeo took a glance at her and saw the knight’s side profile turn paler than the bluish-white moonlight as her blood flow slowed down, her lips weakly pursed together. However, Alice’s feet moved no further back and she had apparently took her golden gauntlet off, unnoticed, with the fingers on her left hand softly touching the bandage over her right eye. As though the crude piece of glove had granted her strength, her withdrawn right foot stepped forth once more.

Clang.

Her footstep rang out sharply as though the thick carpet was never there. Instead of kneeling down, the golden knight threw her chest out proudly towards her lord and her cold voice reverberated.

“Esteemed Highest Minister. Today marks the end of the noble Integrity Knights Brigade. We were felled by the swords held by the mere two rebels standing by my side. …Along with that bottomless obsession and deceit you had built up together with this tower!!”

Chapter 13
The Decisive Battle
5th Month of Human World Calendar 380

1

—Ooh, nice one.

I muttered my somewhat lighthearted opinion of Alice's grand speech in my heart while listening to it.

I would have lost against this pressure that threatened to freeze me solid and ended up stepping back if I didn't.

The hundredth floor of the Central Cathedral that I finally reached was a circular, spacious room, probably forty meters across. A bed, gigantic and circular as well, was placed in the middle of the room and that appeared to be the only furniture around.

And standing still atop that bed was a stark naked, absurdly beautiful girl.

There was no doubt she was the supreme ruler of the Axiom Church—thus effectively, the Human World—the highest minister, Administrator. The overwhelming presence she exuded just by standing there instantly blew away my recognition of this world, Underworld, as a virtual world and how its inhabitants, including her, were AI, or «artificial fluct lights», stored on storage media made by man.

No. It was before I laid my sight on her magnificent silver hair and specular silver eyes; my two hands were already damp with sweat, the murky fear raising goose bumps down my back, by the time I boarded the elevating disk on the ninety-ninth floor to get here.

After all, the cold «presence of death» lingering at the dim hole that opened up straight above the elevating disk was heavier than every single one of the boss rooms I had experienced back in the Floating Castle Aincrad.

My physical body, Kirigaya Kazuto in the real world rather than Kirito the expert swordsman-in-training, would not die in the Soul Translator even if I lost my all of my Life in this Underworld. However, this girl who called herself the highest minister, Administrator, possessed the power to put me through torture worse than an actual death.

That's right, the sage, Cardinal, said it, didn't she? That Administrator was not bound by the Taboo Index she created herself, but she was still incapable of murder due to the concept of taboos taught to her when she was young.

However, that restriction was precisely why the highest minister could make me suffer a horrible fate—for example, forcing me into a situation much like those machinelike elders, connected to tubes, for all eternity.

That said—

My fear, originating from my broad knowledge, could never match that of Alice or Eugeo.

It appeared Eugeo had his «piety module» removed by Administrator, but Alice's was still embedded in her fluct light. I couldn't even begin to imagine the terror she had to endure, standing face to face with the supreme ruler like this.

But still, the golden knight firmly threw out her chest and continued her speech in a clear voice to the very end.

"Our ultimate mission is not to protect the Axiom Church! It is to protect the peaceful lives and tranquil rest of the tens of thousands of the people without might! On the other hand, Esteemed Highest Minister, your deeds serve only as a detriment to the public peace for the many living in the Human World!!"

Standing a step in front, Alice's golden hair shone even brighter, as though radiating with the light of conviction. Her strong and clear voice cut into the cold air the wide room was submerged in and swept it aside.

However, the ruler standing still a distance away showed absolutely no sign of anger at Alice's blatant admonitions, the edges of her lips even turning up slightly as if to express her amusement.

Screaming out in a shrill voice that scraped at my eardrums in her stead, was the chief elder, Chudelkin, who was hiding under the bed for some reason.

"Sh- Shh-Shut upppppppp!!"

Bouncing out from beyond the hanging sheets with vigor, he rolled forward before standing up. Perhaps that made him dizzy as he tottered about for a bit before regaining his footing and threw his head back, trying to look as impressive as he could with his small stature, in between the highest minister and us.

His red and blue jester costume was torn to shreds and his replenished poison gas was let out again because he was swallowed up by the Fragrant Olive Sword's armament full control art that Alice invoked downstairs.

Alice had used that incredible technique that split the sword's blade into hundreds of small edges, bringing forth a golden storm of flowers, to escape from Eugeo's parting gift, that ice jail,

but she mercilessly included Chudelkin after he descended from above with his odd laughter, hopping into the middle of the room.

While his clothes were shredded, he managed to escape without suffering any heavy injuries by exhibiting once again his one and only forte, running away, but there was nowhere else to run here on the highest floor.

But perhaps influenced by Administrator who stood behind him, Chudelkin raised his hands up high, then quickly thrust his two index fingers at Alice.

“A broken knight puppet like yoouuuu!? Mission!? Protect!? You make me laugh, hoo—hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh——!!”

He spun around while laughing shrilly, flashing his underpants with red and blue vertical stripes as his tattered jester outfit fluttered about. Putting both hands onto his waist, he pointed the toes on his left foot at Alice this time and continued yelling.

“The whole lot of you knights!! You’re nothing more than wooden puppets that live on to follow my commands to the letterr!! You will lick this foot if I tell you to, and you will become a horsey if I tell you tooo!! Appreeeciaaaate that mission bestowed upon you integrity knights, hoooooh!!”

He lost his balance then, with his body nearly falling backwards and his huge head leading the way, but he narrowly avoided that by flapping his two hands at his sides.

“In the first placee! How could the Order be destroyed, that’s just ridicuuuu—louss! There aren’t even ten of you out of order, including that trashy number one and twoo! So I still have over twenty pawns at my fingertipss! The church’s rule won’t tremble even one bit from your lonely prattle, you gaudy, golden girl!!”

Though meant as cynicism, it appeared the clown’s petty curses took some tension off Alice. Regaining her characteristic calmness and harshness, the knight lightly shook her head and responded in an icy voice.

“You are the fool here, scarecrow. Do you have straw and rags in replace of a brain in that round head of yours?”

“Wha… whaaaatt!!”

More blood rushed up to his already-red head, but before he could yell out anything, Alice continued her words with the slickness of ice towards the now-purple Chudelkin.

“Ten among the twenty knights remaining are immobile due to that «*reset*» the Esteemed Highest Minister spoke of… the alteration of their memories through arts. And the other half

are riding astride flying dragons even now, engaged in combat at the mountain range at the edge. You can't possibly recall them. The moment you do, the Axiom Church's rule will collapse as the forces of darkness march into the Human World through the caves north, west, and south of the mountain range, and through the «Large East Gate» too."

"Guh… mghghh…"

Alice cast her final words to finish off Chudelkin whose face surpassed purple and turned pitch-black as he groaned.

"No—that is already collapsing. Those ten knights and those flying dragons can't fight on forever. However, there is no one capable of taking their places left here at the cathedral. Or perhaps you will proceed to the Dark Territory in person and have a bout against those darkness knights renowned for their bravery, Chudelkin?"

I couldn't help but to cast my eyes down a little as I kept still behind Alice when she pointed that out. Eugeo and I were the ones who sent the substitute knights, essentially Eldrie, Deusolbert, and the «Four Oscillation Blades», to the hospital.

However, before I could look downwards, the pressure in Chudelkin's head crossed its limit.

"Mmhooooo!! H- Ho-How impertineeeentt!! Don't think you've won that one yet, girlll!!"

Exhaling air that seemed practically as intense as steam through his nose, the clown floundered as he stamped on the floor.

"This is your punishment for such rudeness towards mee!! I'll have you at the mountain range for three years after a *reset* for youuuuu!! No, I'll have you do this and that as my toy before thaaaatt!!"

Following that, the chief elder who began yelling out his plans for Alice in a screechy voice was instantly silenced by a short utterance from Administrator behind him.

"…Hmm."

Completely ignoring Chudelkin whose face returned to white all at once and stood at attention in silence, the highest minister turned to Alice and lightly tilted her face.

"It doesn't seem like an *error* in your logic circuits, after all. And the piety module is still active… In that case, was the «*Code* 871» applied by that person voluntarily released…? Rather than through an unanticipated emotion…?"

—Just what was she talking about? That person…? *Code*, eight, seven, one…?

I frowned, unable to grasp the meaning behind Administrator's words.

The silver-haired girl divulged no further information and tossed the hair flowing over her shoulder behind with her right hand as she switched her tone.

"Well, I won't make any progress on my understanding without further analysis. …Now then, Chudelkin. I shall be magnanimous and grant you an opportunity to restore your worth after how you had fled. Try your best to freeze those three with your arts. As for their Lives, well, anything above two-tenth would be fine."

She carelessly waved her right hand's index finger after she spoke.

With that, the gigantic bed stationed at the highest minister's feet immediately began spinning with a dull noise as my eyes widened.

The bed, measuring ten meters across and fixed with a canopy, sank into the floor like an enormous screw. Chief Elder, Chudelkin, who was acting haughty at its immediate side, jumped aside with a "hohii".

With the entire bed now neatly stored under the floor, its canopy, too, spun about as it fitted under the floor, leaving nothing more than a circular pattern lined by the carpet. After a short pause, the highest minister landed onto the floor without any sound whatsoever.

A thought came to mind and I looked towards my feet, seeing a similar pattern on the floor bounding the elevating disk that had brought Alice and I here. It seemed this room was contrived to have things rising from and sinking into the floor, and I looked around, but the only other pattern I spotted was a small one against the wall far away. I had no guess for what could come out from there.

The highest floor felt astonishingly wide with the bed gone.

The curved wall was completely sided by glass lacking even a single smirch while golden pillars supported the domed canopy. The canopy was adorned with an intricate piece of art that appeared to be based on the creation myth, with the crystals embedded all over it flickering like stars.

The somewhat surprising bit was how mock golden swords decorated every one of those pillars. Even the smallest ones were a meter long, while the largest ones were over three meters long, so it seemed utterly impossible to pull them from the pillars to wield them as weapons, with their absurdly tiny grips. Their blades hardly seemed sharp either.

At any rate, the hundredth floor of the cathedral had absolutely no cover, a space greatly disadvantageous when fighting against a sacred arts user. Having judged that for the moment, I

figured it would be best to charge forward before Chudelkin had the chance to chant his arts and shifted my balanced onto my right foot.

But even before I could move for real, I saw Alice shake her head slightly.

“It will be dangerous rushing in unprepared. The Esteemed Highest Minister should possess the arts needed to capture us alive with a simple touch. She must be targeting that opening by sending Chudelkin to challenge us first.”

“That reminds me…”

Here, Eugeo, who had stayed quite so far, whispered in a tense voice.

“It felt like the highest minister didn’t kill me despite having the chance. In addition, the chief elder intentionally got on… no, touched Bercouli-san when turning him into stone.”

“I see, a «direct contact rule», huh.”

I nodded along while muttering. Aside from the ranged offensive arts, such as flames or ice blades, one would generally need to touch the target with one’s hands—though feet should work just as well—for there to be any effect. It was a fundamental rule of sacred arts that even novice trainees of the academy knew.

In other words, there was no worry of suffering from that terrible petrification art as long as we restrain from direct contact with Chudelkin and Administrator. But at the same time, that would put our swords out of range.

Thus, our situation remained disadvantageous. Alice’s skill with sacred arts was far from Eugeo’s and my reach and if it turned out as an exchange of ranged arts, Chudelkin could likely drive all three of us back on his own as the chief elder.

Eugeo continued talking about something while I bit my lips and continued thinking.

“Besides… the highest minister’s whole body is…”

But before he could, Chudelkin who had fallen onto his rear jumped to his feet like clockworks.

“Hohohohh!”

He showed us, bracing ourselves in a hurry, a revulsive smile entirely different from before as he buttered up to the ruler behind himself.

"…Your Eminence, what magnanimity, to go out of your way and bestow upon me this pleasure when you could have crushed those three damned bugs with a single prod from your little finger! Your humble subject is in tears! He is truly in tearss!! Hgh, hghghgh…"

We could only feel dumbfounded as viscous tears fell from the corners of his eyes in drops just like he had said.

Perhaps Administrator was tired of dealing with him too, but she moved back five meters with a curt remark.

"…Well, just go for it."

"Y-Yess! Your humble subject will fight tooth and nail to meet your expectatiioooooonnss!!"

Chudelkin pressed his two thumbs onto his temple and his tears came to a sudden stop, as though there was a switch there; the small jester grinned broadly as he glared at us.

"Now, now, now… the lot of you won't be getting out of this with a simple apologyyy. I'll shave at least eight-tenth of your Lives away, bit by bit, before you grovel in tears on the ground, so how about you prepare yourselvess?"

"…I had enough of your foolish words. Like I had said downstairs, I will slice your dirty tongue off from its base, so stop your yapping and come."

Unwilling to even give an inch in the battle of words, Alice replied, then gripped her beloved sword's handle with her right hand and strengthened her center of gravity.

Once again, Chudelkin crossed his arms before his chest in a bizarre pose roughly five meters away.

"Nnnnnn, unforgivableeee!! If you desire to be licked by my beautiful tongue so much, I'll lick you all you likeee!! After you're frozen stifff!! …Hoaaah—!!"

Chudelkin jumped up high with that cry and launched himself behind into the air, landing with a thump after one a half flips and a twist. Not on his feet or his hands, but on the top of his head.

"……"

Eugeo and I weren't the only ones rendered speechless; the same went for Alice. Sure, the chief elder might be more stable upside down due to that super huge round head on his stick-like torso, but just what was he thinking, cutting off his movement?

But the person in question, Chudelkin, had an exceedingly serious face on—hard as it was to recognize, with him upside down—as all of his four limbs shot out, before he screamed out the start to a sacred art in his ear-piercing voice.

"*System… caaaaall—!!*"

In response, Alice drew her sword with a shrill noise. Despite being at a loss for an appropriate response, Eugeo and I braced ourselves with our swords too.

"*Generate cryogenic elementt!!*"

Chudelkin shouted out the generation art for cryogenic elements awfully quick.

The power and scale of ranged offensive arts could be mostly predicted from the number of elements generated at the start. I squinted in order to not miss the points of light appearing on the chief elder's hands.

Paan!! Chudelkin slapped his two hands together while doing a headstand and spread them wide. Blue flecks of light were brought forth on the fingers of both hands with a faint, audible pulse—ten of them.

"Damn, the max, huh."

I cursed without thinking much, but it wasn't like I didn't expect that. Even a beginner like me who knew nothing more than the basics could generate five on a hand if I focused. Chudelkin was the Axiom Church's strongest arts user, if excluding Administrator, and it would be only natural, instead, for him to generate ten on two hands.

Alice stayed still, but I took a step to the right and held out my left hand to create thermal elements, the opposing element. Eugeo, too, adopted the exact same posture. If we managed five elements each somehow, we might be able to defend against Chudelkin's cryogenic elements—

However, that happened when I was about to start my shout.

Paan!! The noise from a slap rang out once more.

That was the noise made by Chudelkin, on his head, when he deftly slapped his two bare feet together. His two legs part next and extended out into a straight line like his two hands. Immediately, all ten tips of his toes, too, had cryogenic elements generated on them with a noise like falling frost.

The phrase Eugeo hoarsely muttered on my left was one I fully agreed with.

"…No way…"

While maintaining a total of twenty blue elements on his hands and feet, Chudelkin showed a huge smile with his inverted mouth.

"Ohoh, ohohohoho… Quaking in your boots, peeing in your trouserss? I can't very well have you lump me up with those trashy arts user, you know?"

In the Underworld, control over sacred arts, or to put it plainly, magic, was done through voice commands and the user's imagination. Taking healing arts as an example, holding animosity in your heart towards the target would have a sharp decline in its effect while praying for someone to recover with all your effort could bring about a heal beyond one's authority.

The same applied to offensive arts that manipulated elements.

Reshaping the generated elements and firing them required more than the voice commands, or the words of the art. A conductor for the user's imagination, linked to the consciousness, was absolutely essential.

That was, in short, one's fingers. One had to retain the image of an element connected to one finger for the entire duration of the art incantation.

In other words, no matter how high ranking an arts user was, it was normal to manipulate a maximum of only ten elements through both hands. To break that restriction and use the toes on one's feet as imagination circuits, one would have to continuously hover in the sky—or do a headstand with only one's head. Like Chief Elder Chudelkin.

"Ohh, hohohoo…!"

Continuing his shrill cries, Chudelkin chanted the command to shape the elements at an exceedingly quick pace and swung his right and left hands towards us, who were standing still, one after another with hardly a pause between them.

"*Dischaaaar—geee*!!"

Whoosh!!

Cutting through the air, five icicles released a swirl of cold air while they shot forth. Another five chased after.

Even if we wanted to dodge, the two layers of ice spears, shot out high and low, revealed no blind spots as they spread out in a fan shape while flying here. Figuring I could only knock down the icicles likely to hit myself, I firmed up the grip on my cherished sword in my right hand and looked at—

A golden sparkle obscuring my sight.

With a horizontal sweep, Alice's Fragrant Olive Sword divided into countless small edges, starting from its tip, and fluttered as they dispersed into a whirl.

It wasn't my first time seeing Alice's armament full control art, but both Eugeo and I had our breaths taken away by its frightening beauty.

Only the bluish white moonlight shining in from the glass windows to the south illuminated the cathedral's highest floor. But still, the golden petals drew traces in a bright shade of golden yellow as if they emitted their own light, soaring as a dense meteor shower.

"Hahh!"

Alice swung down the grip left in her hand with a sharp cry.

The storm of flowers fluttering in the air followed her movement's lead and engulfed the ten icicles, producing the rigid noises of something being shaved away. Like tossing ice cubes into a high speed blender, the ice spears shot by Chudelkin quickly turned into harmless sherbet and melted, their resources futilely scattering into the air.

"…Nhn… gngngnngnnn…"

With that sacred arts fired so proudly easily rendered powerless, Chudelkin bit tightly and grinded his upper and lower jaws against each other while roaring out in an upset voice.

"…Don't think you've won yet with a crude grater like thatt! How about this thenn! Hoooooohh!!"

He swung his two legs, lowered horizontally with the ten elements still on them, up from his sides with force.

The cryogenic elements that flew up high, drawing parallel blue streaks, coalesced into one near the ceiling and produced a rectangular lump of ice.

The ice continued enlarging while heavy, dull thumps reverberated, growing into a cube with each side probably measuring at least two meters long. The transformation didn't stop there and fiendishly sharp spikes thrust out all across it in a dense formation.

If the laws of physics in the Underworld conformed to those in the real world, the ice die in the air would be totalled up to a mass of over seven tons. Quickly coming to the conclusion that taking something like that on with a sword would be impossible, I unconsciously took a step back.

“Hohihii… how about thatt, how’s the taste of my greatest and finest artt!! Now, it’s time to flatten all of youuuu—!!”

While upside down, Chudelkin dropped his two legs that were extended straight up. The spiky die began falling with a roar.

Eugeo and I lost our wits and jumped to the sides. But once again, Knight Alice didn’t take a single step back. She firmly grasped the gigantic object, looming ever closer to crush her, in her sight while standing upright—

“Ha… aaaaah——!!”

Letting out a roar more ferocious than any of those in the battles thus far, she raised the handle of her beloved sword in her right hand up high.

The small golden blades floating about gathered with a crisp, metallic noise and created a cone probably around three meters long. The drill with countless barbs lined up across its surface growled and spun as it intercepted the falling ice cube.

A tremendously loud noise and dazzling flash was produced the moment the two objects met, causing the room to tremble violently.

“Kuhnnuhooooohh… c-cru-crush… iitttt!”

“……Break it… O, flowers…!!”

The features of the chief elder and integrity knight leaned the same amount on the scale of beauty, though towards different ends, as they wrung out desperate cries.

When skills of this scale collide, their numerical priorities would naturally play a part, but the most important factor for victory would be one’s willpower and potential for imagination.

The blue block of ice and the gold spiral struggled for seconds with a point that glowed white with incandescence between them, but it didn’t take long before they gradually began breaking into it. The glaring flash and ear-splitting noise of the impact made it impossible to know whether the cube was crushing the drill with its weight or if the drill was piercing through the cube as it rotated.

The result of the match was clear only when the two objects were practically laid over each other.

Crack; the sharp noise of something shattering rang out and cracks ran over the entirety of the ice cube.

Immediately after, the block of ice that could have fitted a small hut dispersed into enormous fragments as they scattered in all direction. The surrounding air was instantly dyed white and I guarded the incoming wave of cold air with my left arm.

“Hyaaa!?”

The panicked shriek came from Chief Elder Chudelkin.

Still on his head, his stick-like limbs quivered all over.

“No… no way, of all the ridiculous… H-How could the transcendentally beautiful and extraordinarily cool art Her Eminence had bestowed upon me…”

The mocking smile finally vanished from his lips, so red they appeared venomous, but still, Alice wasn’t left unhurt though she splendidly succeeded in shattering the huge block of ice. The small edges that formed that cone returned to their original longsword appearance with a wave of her right arm and the knight valiantly stayed on her feet, despite her posture falling in complete disarray. She must have been hit by several fragments of the ice block that broken apart at point-blank range from her.

“Alice…!”

Holding me back with her left hand when I ran towards her, Alice flicked the tip of her beloved sword towards the distant Chudelkin.

“Chudelkin, your faithless techniques are nothing more than a paper balloon blown up with air! Just like your own body!!”

“Wh… w-what did…”

Chudelkin’s curses and swears stopped at last upon receiving Alice’s rebuke, as sharp as any of her slash. His round head distorted to its limit and trembled violently, as his sweat flowed in the reverse direction like a waterfall.

It was then—

When the highest minister, Administrator, who had been watching the battle from the back of the room finally spoke with words that bordered on expressing her boredom.

“Honestly, you certainly stay a fool no matter how many years pass, don’t you, Chudelkin?”

The chief elder’s limbs instantly shrunk in.

In contrast to Chudelkin who had contracted to the size of a child, the highest minister tilted her body in a graceful motion and lay down in mid-air, on what seemed exactly like an invisible sofa. Lightly floating upwards in that posture, she then crossed her slender legs as she continued.

“The Fragrant Olive Sword Alice has possesses a physical priority that is considered top class even among all of the *divine objects* in existence. And the girl firmly believes in that fact too. To think you would try a physical-type offensive art on an opponent like that, have you even forgotten the basics of sacred arts?”

“Hah… hohohohii….”

Tears suddenly fell from Chudelkin’s two eyes while his high-pitched voice leaked out. He was upside down, so the large drops flowed down his forehead one after another, creating a stain on the carpet as they reached the tip of his head.

“Ohoohh… what a waste, what an honor, what an inspiration!! For Her Eminence to confer her teachings onto her undeserving subject directly…?! Your expectations shall not be in vain, this Chudelkin will ensure your kindness will be repaaaaaaaaiiidd!!”

It appeared Administrator’s voice had more effect than healing arts on Chudelkin. The chief elder’s fear from earlier was swept away in an instant and he gave Alice a bizarre glare that was filled with what was probably his own unique form of determination.

“Number thirtyy!! You said it, didn’t youu, that I was a paper balloon with no substance!!”

“…And you believe you can refute that?”

“I doo——!! I do, I do, I do, I dooo!!”

Red flames audibly flared up within Chudelkin’s two eyes—or so it seemed.

“Even I have something I believe in!! And that very thing is lovee!! My love that lacks all falsehood towards Her Eminence, our sacred and beautiful Highest Ministeeeeerr—!!”

I would have never guessed those words originated from anywhere aside from some third-rate drama, but the current time and situation allowed them to resound through the room, powerfully, with a tinge of tragedy. Even if it was a half-naked clown, upside-down on his gigantic head, who spoke them.

Chudelkin glared at Alice with fiery eyes and spread his limbs out wide while wringing out shrill words directed at Administrator behind himself.

“Y- Yo-Your Eminence, Highest Ministerr!!”

“What is it? Chudelkin.”

“Your Eminence, your humble subject, the chief elder, Chudelkin, begs for you to grant his insolent request, the first in his many years of service under youu!! Your subject shall now stake his life to exterminate the rebelss! In the event that he succeeeds, will Your Eminencee! W-Will Your Eminenceee grant the allowance for these hands and lips to come into contact with your noble being, and to s-share a single night’s dream with it, I beg of you, I beg of you, I beg of you, pleaseeeeeee!!?

—That’s one mighty direct request towards the absolute ruler of the Human World.

But I had no doubt whatsoever those screams were his true feelings, emotions expressed from the depths of the spirit that belonged to this man named Chudelkin.

Listening to the monologue that went beyond being tragic and could even be considered heroic, Eugeo, Alice, and I were all frozen in place at a loss for words.

On the other hand, the highest minister, Administrator, heard Chudelkin’s wish as she floated at the far end of the room and—

Her pearl grey lips sharply twisted up as though she found him unbearably comical.

Shades of scorn and ridicule quivered in her mirror-like eyes that rejected all light. Administrator’s right hand covered her mouth as she spoke in a voice, filled with affection, contrary to that expression.

“…Certainly, Chudelkin.”

Or so she whispered.

“I will swear it on Stacia, the Goddess of Creation. You shall have every last nook of this body for a night the moment you accomplish your task.”

I knew there was no truth to those words as a human of the real world which was likewise immersed in lies and deception.

The humans of this world, likely caused by the architecture of artificial fluct lights, are incapable of disobeying laws and regulations ranked above them. Those laws include the local ones in

villages and cities, the Empire Fundamental Law, the Taboo Index, and any personal vows to the goddesses.

The number of laws binding each individual lessened as one climbed the ranks in the ruling structure, but that rule applied to the supervisors with the highest standing, Cardinal and Administrator, all the same. The code of behavior passed down by their parent still lived on, with Cardinal unable to place a tea cup on a table and Administrator unable to kill a human.

But these eyes of mine had just witnessed how Administrator was not bound by her vows to the goddesses a moment ago. In other words, she did not hold even a scrap of faith towards the three goddesses: Stacia the Creation Goddess, Solus the Sun Goddess, and Terraria the Land Goddess, who granted the Axiom Church its authority.

But of course, Chudelkin did not discern his master's lies.

Upon hearing the words Administrator spoke while restraining her snickers, large drops of tears overflowed anew from Chudelkin's two eyes.

"Ohh… ohhh…… your humble subject is now… engulfed in happiness incomparable to any otheerr…… my… my will to fight is swelling up a hundred times over and my spirit is overflowing, to put it into words, your subject is now truly invincibleeeee!!"

His tears audibly vaporized—

A brilliance suddenly enveloped all of Chudelkin, like flames.

"*Syss! Temm! Caaaaall!! Generateee thermaaal elemeee——ntttt!!*"

His hands and feet cut through the air and points of light, burning red, formed on his limbs, currently extended straight to his fingertips or toes. The fact that this was Chudelkin's final and greatest attack was made clear to even me who stood behind Alice.

Like the cryogenic elements earlier, the number of thermal elements generated, gleaming like rubies, totalled up to twenty.

Chudelkin's two feet were freed from their role of supporting his body as he stood on his head. But that said, individually imaging each toe among the ten on his feet would not be possible without amassing a tremendous amount of practice.

I was totally focused on his bizarre appearance and personality, but with his years of experience, Chudelkin was a formidable opponent not to be taken lightly just like the senior integrity knights—perhaps even surpassing them with his number of years.

Maybe he sensed my shudders, but Chudelkin's eyes narrowed with triumph, then widened as much as they could next. His tiny pupils emitted a crimson light and my fear turned to shock. I wondered if his willpower had turned into flames and shifted to his eyes like some hot-blooded protagonist, but then realized that was off.

The light burning right before Chudelkin's two eyes were large thermal elements. That guy had used even his own two eyes as terminals and generated his twenty-first and twenty-second elements.

Elements radiate resources with properties conforming to their type before they were fired, though dim. It would feel just a little warm when thermal elements were brought forth several centimeters from your fingers, but he would never get out unscathed when maintaining ones that large right before his eyeballs. The skin around his eyes started sizzling at once.

But the chief elder appeared utterly unconcerned over both the heat and pain. Chudelkin smirked with his whole face, changing from looking strange to evil with his eye sockets blackened, then screamed out at a pitch higher than before.

"Behooooooooldd, this is my greatest and strongest sacreeed aaaarttt…! Come forth, demonn!! Incinerate the rebels to charss!!"

His once withdrawn limbs swung out faster than the eye could follow. Instead of transforming immediately, the twenty elements fired organized themselves into five horizontal rows in the air as they flew about in between Chudelkin and us at a ferocious speed.

Their trajectories gleamed red and reproduced the shape of a gigantic human as a whole while I watched on, speechless.

Short legs. A fat belly that swelled out. Curiously long arms. And a head wearing a crown with numerous horns extending from it. It was just like Chudelkin before he released the smoke screen from his clothes, magnified several times, a giant clown.

The elements that created the blazing, five meters tall clown drew vertical stripes in the shade of deep crimson that dyed jester costumes before vanishing.

Though modeled after Chudelkin's face, the clown's face, present so high above that I had to look up, appeared several times more vicious. A tongue of flames flickered in and out from the gap between its thick lips and a frigid chill radiated from the crevices that made up its narrow, long, slanted eyes despite how it was a flaming giant.

Chudelkin swung his hands and feet around as he constructed the clown with thermal elements and to finish things off, he shut his eyes where the last two elements resided with enough force to make a noise. With that, the thermal elements moved towards the clown's dark eye sockets and resided within them as eyes, flaming red.

As though possessed by Chudelkin's own spirit, the gigantic clown stared down at us with a murderous gaze. It brought up its right foot that wore a pointed shoe and stepped down hard on the floor slightly in front. A heavy tremor accompanied the inferno swirling up from the giant's foot as heat wavered in its surroundings.

Eugeo and I were in no state of mind to do anything but stand still, dumbfounded, but a murmur from Alice standing before us prompted us to grip our swords in a fluster.

"…I did not know he was capable of arts on this level either."

Alice's words remained calm even in such a situation, but they ended off on a hoarse note, perhaps reflecting the unrest in her heart.

"It appears I have underestimated Chudelkin. Unfortunately, my flowers are incapable of destroying that intangible giant of flames. Even if I focus on defense, it is unlikely I could hold for long."

"…In other words, we can only attack Chudelkin directly in that time, huh…"

Alice let out some crisp instructions for me as I muttered in a rasp.

"Exactly. I will do everything I can to defend for ten seconds. Kirito, Eugeo, defeat Chudelkin in that time. However, you must not approach close enough to fight with your sword. There's what the Esteemed Highest Minister is waiting for."

"Ten…"

"…Seconds."

Eugeo and I groaned simultaneously and exchanged looks.

He had overwhelmed me with the composure of ice when we crossed swords downstairs, but it seems Eugeo had regained his emotions when freed from his knighthood. While feeling glad, despite the situation we were in, over the fear and panic showing up on my partner's face, I racked my brain.

If Alice wanted me to charge in while she's dealing with the flaming clown, I would happily do it. I played that role when clearing the bosses back in the old Aincrad and besides, Chudelkin should be completely vulnerable while he controlled the clown.

But she was correct in how we had no guarantee that Administrator would stay quiet as we advanced. As such, we had to attack Chudelkin without approaching him, but as we were in the swordsman class, Eugeo and I had only two methods for far range attacks.

The first would be to use sacred arts like he did. But with the level of arts Eugeo and I were able to use, I doubt we could penetrate the defenses of a high ranking arts user like Chudelkin to cut away his Life.

The other would be to the secret move I had been saving up—or in other words, the armament full control art; but that came with its own problems. Activating it required reciting that lengthy art Cardinal had composed. That would definitely be impossible in ten seconds. Eugeo managed to use his full control art without the chant when he was turned into an integrity knight, but he probably couldn't repeat that as he was now. Of course, neither could I.

"……"

As though sneering at me while I bit my lips, the blazing clown swayed its enormous body from side to side as it slowly began its advance. Its movements were hardly nimble, but it was big, after all. Each step brought it over a meter closer.

It was right after the flaming clown drew close enough for us to feel the heat it radiated on our skin when Alice finally took action.

She raised the Fragrant Olive Sword held in her right hand overhead. Her left arm, extended straight behind, and her legs, parted towards the front and back, were as tense as a bow's string.

A gale like a tornado suddenly rose from Alice's feet, violently setting her white long skirt and golden long hair aflutter. The Fragrant Olive Sword's blade split into hundreds of petals enveloped in golden light and began to slide through the air in rows.

"——Spin, flowers!!"

A shout that seemed impossible with a body as slender as hers shook the air.

At the same time, the golden petals whirled at such extreme speeds that they appeared merged into a single mass, growing into a huge tornado all of a sudden.

They densely grouped together and produced a cone to break the ice cube earlier, but they did the reverse this time. They spread out like a funnel, diagonally pointing up towards the sky from Alice's hand, with a diameter close to five meters even at its narrow end.

The golden storm sucked up the surrounding air, becoming a gale that blew without form or structure, rocking Eugeo and me.

Just reaching out alone would cover the distance left between us; the flaming clown jumped up high with its unvanishing sneer, almost reaching the ceiling, then fearlessly descended into Alice's tornado.

Dobaaa! The roar resembling a blazing furnace erased all other noise.

The golden tornado extended almost straight up and swallowed the flaming clown's feet within itself. The flames were torn into by the edges rotating at high speeds and scattered like grand fireworks, scorching the air.

However, the clown retained its gigantic size and showed a broad sneer across its entire face as it slowly, slowly stomped onto the tornado. Alice's feet quivered faintly as she supported it from straight below and the glimpse of her side profile I had showed a grim visage.

As though unable to endure the clown's heat, the petals that made up the tornado became visibly redder. Alice and the Fragrant Olive Sword she held must have steadily losing their Lives even in this very moment.

There were—eight seconds left.

It would be impossible to defeat Chudelkin with sacred arts. There weren't enough time for the full control art either. The only method left to me was the black sword in my right hand and the techniques I had immersed myself in.

During the two years I spent in the Underworld, I had practiced the many sword skills I knew from the past in order to teach Eugeo the «Aincrad style». Through that, I noticed sword skills in this world occasionally demonstrated power far exceeding what they possessed back in the world of SAO.

After all, most of the motions that lead to the result are determined not by the system's control but the user's willpower, their imagination. The small spider that watched over me for so long, Charlotte, and Knight Alice had called that power, «incarnation».

Thus. The power and range of sword skills that were strictly restricted by the system back in the old Aincrad could be amplified through the power of incarnation—probably.

But when considering it from the other end, fear, panic, hesitation, and such negative notions will weaken one's techniques as well.

Inside of myself, the desire to dissociate from and to forget who I was in the old SAO days—that avatar given the two names, «The Black Swordsman» and «The Dual Blades»—had spread its roots deep.

Even I couldn't provide an accurate analysis of where that emotion originated from. Though it might be due to the aversion to being treated as a hero, or the guilt over those I failed to save or those who died, it was just as possible those reasons were utterly wrong.

However, I could say this for certain. As much as I loathed it, «The Black Swordsman» was definitely a part of myself and gave form to me, granting me power, even now.

Yes, «he», who fought in that world, was now here—no, that should be «I» instead.

Seven seconds left.

Feeling, on my cheek, the heat from the giant stomping on Alice's tornado, I stretched out my body much towards the right and lowered my waist.

Bringing the black sword in my right hand up to the level of my shoulders, I wielded it horizontal and pulled it far back.

I put my left hand on the sword's tip like an aircraft catapult.

This skill was one that I had never tried using up until this point, whether it was to teach Eugeo or to simply reproduce. I knew why. This was the sword skill «The Black Swordsman» understood the most, the skill he used the most. You could even say it was symbolic of him.

I could see Chief Elder Chudelkin, on his head, at a point fifteen meters straight from the end of the slightly translucent black blade. His eyes, with their blackened borders, were closed, but I had no doubt he had linked his sight to that of the flaming clown through some sort of technique. In other words, he should have already noticed my actions.

I had one chance to attack and I couldn't possibly have it defended or evaded. In that sense, this distance of fifteen meters felt unbearably far. Chudelkin was likely incapable of nimble movements while supporting himself with his head, but I had already witnessed his tenacity at times that mattered more than I needed to. Even half of a half-second would be enough; I had to get Chudelkin's attention off myself.

Six seconds left. I whispered to my partner with words as fast as I could muster.

"His eyes."

"Got it."

I gave him a glance at his near-immediate reply and saw an ice arrow, glowing blue, held in Eugeo's right hand, though I had no idea when he made it. It wasn't all that large, but its dazzling radiance served as proof of its high priority. Even I didn't notice it while standing beside him, but he must have converted the cold air resources released during the exchange earlier between Alice and Chudelkin into elements.

Five seconds left. Eugeo's hands moved as though they drew an invisible longbow tight and the nocked ice arrow let out a blue flash.

"*Discharge!!*"

The ice arrow was shot with that short command, but not straight towards Chudelkin.

Eugeo's left hand guided it first around the flaming clown's right, then towards its left in a large curve as it soared upwards. The blue streak drawn by the ice arrow in the room dyed red by flames glittered brightly from their severe contrast. The clown's burning eyes, too, revolved as they chased the arrow.

Four seconds left. Just before the ice arrow reached the ceiling of the room, Eugeo gripped his left hand tightly. With that as the signal, the arrow swooped down in a straight line at several times its previous speed. The keen arrowhead's aim—

Was not Chief Elder Chudelkin.

It was the one slovenly lying sprawled in mid-air far behind him, the highest minister, Administrator.

Three seconds left.

The silver-haired girl showed absolutely no sign of panic even as she watched the rapid decline of the ice arrow brought about by Eugeo's full might. She gave it a miffed glance, then pursed her pearl grey lips and let out a light sigh.

That alone sufficed to shatter the ice arrow with it still over a meter from the highest minister.

However, the true target of Eugeo's attack was not Administrator herself—it was Chudelkin's abnormal attachment for her.

The moment the arrow went behind him, Chudelkin's actual two eyes opened and his head spun around with his entire body as he cried out.

"Your Eminencee, take careeeee!"

Two seconds left.

My body began its motions before Chudelkin's scream reached me.

I pulled back my right arm as much as I could while it held my sword at shoulder-level. Detecting the pre-motion, the blade assumed a light as red as blood.

The system assist began moving my body. Simultaneously, I kicked off the floor with my two feet, opened widely, front and back. Changing the acceleration into torque, I sent it into my

right shoulder through my back. Switching that torque back into a linear force, I drove forth the black sword that had fused with my right arm.

The metallic roar of a jet engine rang out alongside a crimson flash more vivid than flames; the sword lunged straight forth.

One-handed straight sword, single hit technique, «Vorpal Strike».

The reason for my frequent usage of this skill in the old SAO was its might that allowed it to decide a battle in a single strike and its long range uncommon to one-handed straight swords. The deep crimson light effect would pierce through the air a distance of two blade-lengths away. Its maximum reach, with one's right arm completely extended, boasted a range that surpassed even long spears at times.

However, my target, Chief Elder Chudelkin, was fifteen meters away. The normal Vorpal Strike would never reach.

I had to extend the range of this skill that I was unleashing for the first time in the Underworld by over five times through the power of imagination… of incarnation.

It wouldn't be easy.

But I doubt it would be impossible. I know.

Knight Alice's faith in me had allowed her to throw her beloved sword and herself into that conflagration. Eugeo, my close friend, had mustered all of his willpower and wisdom in firing that sacred art to provide this opening for my attack.

I had no right to call myself a swordsman if I failed to match their determination here.

Yes, before all else, I am the swordsman, Kirito.

"U… oooohh——!!"

I released a war cry from the depths of myself with all my might.

A black, fingerless glove oozed out from mid-air and covered my right hand.

Following that, black leather appeared above my ragged sleeve and continued on towards my shoulders from that arm, before finally reaching out for my torso. That shortly transformed into a long coat and its studded hem ruffled violently.

The intensity of the light effect engulfing the sword grew as though it had exploded. A radiance of deep crimson expanded far enough to negate the scarlet scattered by the flaming clown and concentrated upon the sword's point.

"Ooohh!!"

I unshackled the last of my strength with a savage yell.

One second, left.

2

—What was that sound!?

Eugeo's eyes opened wide at the peculiar noise booming out right beside him.

All secret moves produce strong light and sound. However, this was different from all of those he had heard thus far. It was deep, heavy, firm, and sharp; it was as though the sword itself had screamed out in anger—

The source of that roar was the black sword held in Kirito's right hand. Its blade with its black crystalline radiance had its sharp edge quivering violently while letting out that ear-piercing howl. Its actions were not merely auditory. A profound red shine enveloped the entire sword.

—It's a secret move. But I had never seen one like this.

Eugeo held his breath. The phenomenon that truly surprised him, however, only happened immediately after.

A sudden, glaring light engulfed his partner who held onto the sword and he transformed into an utterly different outfit from before.

Kirito should have been clad in a black shirt and trousers of the same color, frayed from the many fierce battles. However, the wave of light shifted from his right arm, towards his torso and feet, with an overcoat of black leather with a high neck and long sleeves spontaneously appearing as it did and his trousers, too, instantly converted to one made from thin leather.

The process ended quicker than the blink of an eye, but the phenomenon did not end there. Distinct changes occurred on Kirito's own body as well, though on a smaller scale than those clothes.

First, his black hair grew slightly and concealed half of his side profile.

Next, the black eyes peeking from the gaps in his swinging fringe exuded a light he had never seen before. A light more keen than when he fought against the goblin group in the Northern Cave, or when he sliced off Raios Antinuous's arm, or when he crossed swords with Deusolbert, Fanatio, and the rest. It was as if Kirito himself had merged with the sword, becoming a keen edge.

A cry overflowing with savagery burst forth from beyond his bared teeth right after.

"U… ooooohh——!!"

The metallic roar and crimson light from the sword heightened in intensity and immediately following that, Kirito's right hand shot forth so swiftly, it simply disappeared. The cuff of his long coat flapped fiercely like the wings of a demon.

It was an Aincrad-style secret move; it certainly was.

But still—what an astounding thrusting skill. It was a mighty single-hit skill different from those Kirito had taught him thus far, one that seemed closer to the High Norkia style, if he had to choose, but it was stripped entirely of the traditional styles' focus on the beauty of the style, a single strike devoted to piercing through the enemy—

"……!"

With his breath held, Eugeo somehow chased after the crimson glow with his eyes.

Kirito's aim was, of course, Chief Elder Chudelkin who controlled the fiery clown. However, there was fifteen mel to where the enemy stationed himself. No secret move could possibly reach him as long as one still used a sword.

Chudelkin did not look towards them the moment Kirito released his thrusting skill. His eyes were pointed towards the back end of the hall where the ice arrow shot by Eugeo had passed by mere seconds ago.

He had poured all of his knowledge and inspiration into that art, but it was ineffective on Administrator as expected, shattering upon a single breath from her. However, Chudelkin had turned back and warned in his shrill voice instead of ignoring the attack targeted at the ruler as Eugeo predicted, so he should have fulfilled Kirito's request to divert his attention.

Perhaps at ease after the ice arrow died out without any difficulty, but Chudelkin turned his face back while still on his head.

His narrow eyes widened as much as they could in that instant as they filled with a hectic jumble of emotions.

The first was shock, towards the flash and roar let out by Kirito's sword as it thrust forth in that very moment.

The next was relief, towards how it was a mere thrusting skill that could not possibly reach him.

The last was fear, towards the blade of crimson light extending incessantly before his eyes as it lavishly let out that metallic roar.

He forgot to breathe as surprise overtook him; the same went for Eugeo. The light in the shade of blood passed by Alice's left as she guarded against the flaming clown in front of Kirito, dashing through a distance of fifteen mel in an instant—

Easily stabbing through the exact middle of Chudelkin's torso, thin as a pole, while he stood on his head.

The gleaming blade reached out for almost another two mel before it disintegrated into crimson specks that drifted into the air. The copious spray of actual blood followed immediately after. The source was the injury in the center of Chudelkin's chest, large enough to practically split him apart.

"Ohooooooohhhhh……"

That deflated voice, devoid of strength, flowed on for a long time.

The body that stood on its head slowly lost its balance and splashed into the pool of fresh blood it had personally created.

As more blood than seemed possible from his meager body steadily flowed out, Chudelkin lifted his trembling right arm and extended it towards Administrator who hovered in mid-air.

"……Aah… mine, my…… Emi… nence……"

The man's expression, as he let out that frail voice, was out of Eugeo's sight from his position. His right hand fell onto the carpet with a damp noise and there, Chief Elder Chudelkin ceased to move.

With that, the flaming clown that was on the verge of stomping the golden tornado above Knight Alice out of existence, too, was extinguished as its rotund belly turned into a mass of white fumes and its grin melted into the air. The tiny golden edges manipulated by Alice decelerated slowly and drifted in the air as though they lost their purpose with their enemy's annihilation.

Eugeo's ears thought they were numbed with the sudden, complete silence that settled in while he slowly returned his view towards the right.

Kirito had stopped all motions with his waist still much lowered and his right arm extended as far as it could go.

The light remaining on the black sword's surface swiftly vanished and the cuff of his overcoat fluttered one last time before it hung down. Eugeo watched on with his breath held as his partner's appearance blurred and returned to what it was, starting from one end.

Even after returning to that simple black shirt and trousers, Kirito remained still for a while. His right arm eventually gently swung down and the tip of the black sword struck the carpet with a thump.

Eugeo was once again left wondering if he should call out to his partner whose head hung down.

Kirito, who had helped even the deputy knight commander, Fanatio, likely felt no joy over depriving Chief Elder Chudelkin of his Life, even if he was an enemy. His side profile visible through the gaps in his fringe, now at its original length, showed absolutely no residue of that icy cool-headedness he briefly had during that attack.

The one to break those several seconds of silence was Alice as the swarm of small edges returned to her sword with a sharp, metallic noise. Feeling tension from the knight's back, Eugeo turned his eyes further into the hall once more.

Drifting in the air, Administrator reached her slender left hand towards the chief elder as he lay prostrate on the floor.

Chudelkin was obviously at the end of his rope, but did she intend to apply a healing art on him? Or will the highest minister call his Life back from the grave—?

It happened when Eugeo sharply drew in a breath.

Without leaking even a shred of emotion, the highest minister's voice leisurely streamed on.

"At least put him away, how unsightly."

A casual wave of her left hand blew Chudelkin's corpse away as though it was as light as a paper doll and he crashed into the window on the far east side before falling onto the floor below and coiling up small.

"…What have you…"

Alice muttered in a hushed voice upon seeing the highest minister's deed.

The girl's personality might have been modified into that of a collected integrity knight, but Eugeo, too, understood that overwhelming desire to comment. He had no respect whatsoever for Chudelkin, but at the very least, he had lost his life in a fight where he expended all of himself for his master. At the bare minimum, his corpse deserved a civil burial.

However, Administrator did not even spare another look at Chudelkin's abandoned corpse; on the contrary, she appeared to have wiped all traces of the chief elder's existence from her memory as she showed that mysterious smile exactly like before and spoke.

"…Well, that may have been a boring *show*, but I did gather that small bit of useful *data* from it."

The highest minister entered a monologue mingled with sacred tongue in that unblemished, beautiful voice. Still lying upon that invisible sofa, she softly glided five mel through the air and moved to the middle of the round hall.

Sweeping away a strand of that silver hair blowing in the wind, Administrator smoothly narrowed her eyes, wavering with prismatic light, and looked towards Eugeo's side with her magnetic gaze—focusing upon Kirito who still had his head down.

"*Irregular* boy. I could not access your *properties* in detail, but I thought that was as you were an unregistered *unit* born from an irregular marriage… that was incorrect. You are from there, aren't you? A human from «the other side»… aren't you?"

Eugeo barely comprehended any of those words pitched out in a whisper.

—There? The other side…?

Kirito, his black-haired partner, had appeared in the forest south of Rulid two and a half years ago with his memories gone as a «lost child of Vector».

The elders of the village had told Eugeo that such phenomenona of humans appearing every once in a while were acts of mischief committed by Vector, the god of darkness, reaching out with his long arm from beyond the mountain range at the edge and erasing those people's memories, but Eugeo only truly believed in that when he was still a child.

There are times when people face a situation so painful and dismal that they let go of those memories of their own wills, even taking their own lives at times. The one who taught Eugeo that was the old Garitta, the previous generation's woodcutter. Long ago, he had lost his wife to a drowning incident and his excess lamentations back then had apparently robbed him of over half of his memories regarding his wife. The old man had laughed then, claiming it to be an act of both benevolence and chastisement from the goddess who governed lives, Stacia.

As such, Eugeo guessed Kirito was in a similar situation and thus, kept that to himself even now. He figured something distressing and sorrowful must have happened to him in his home town, likely in the eastern or southern regions when judging from his hair and the color of his eyes, finally reaching Rulid's forest after wandering for a long time with his memories lost.

That was one of the reasons he did not ask Kirito about his past during their journey to the central capital and those days in the academy. Of course, he could not deny the fear that he might return to his home town upon regaining his memories might have led to that as well.

However.

The highest minister who possessed the capability to look over the entire Human World had referred to Kirito's birthplace with strange words.

The other side. In other words, she meant beyond the mountain range at the edge—the Dark Territory, the land of darkness? Was the one and only clue he had to Kirito's birth, the Aincrad style with its consecutive sword techniques, taken from the land of darkness?

No. The highest minister should possess detailed information on even the Dark Territory. The integrity knights under her command passed through the mountain range freely and crossed swords with the darkness knights. Thus, he doubted Administrator who ruled over them would not know of the countries and cities in the Dark Territory, along with those who lived in them. She had no need to express it in vague words like calling it the other side.

Following that line of thought—

What Administrator's words referred to was the outside of this world, a place where even her eyes could not reach…? Beyond even the land of darkness… perhaps even farther than that, in a place that could be said to be another world…?

Such a notion felt far too abstract for Eugeo and he could not even find the right words to express his own thoughts. However, his intuition told him he was on the verge of discovering something tremendously important, what could be considered a secret behind this world. Tormented by that burning desire, Eugeo shifted his sight and gazed at the night sky extending out beyond the gigantic windows.

The stardust ocean flowed on in the rifts between the streaming black clouds.

Beyond that sky… was Kirito born in a land there? What sort of place was it? And had Kirito regained his memories of it…?

The one who broke the seconds of silence was his black-haired partner who slowly got up.

“That’s right.”

Kirito replied in the affirmation to the highest minister’s question with a single short yet heavy line.

Practically numbed with shock, Eugeo looked at his partner’s profile. So Kirito really had regained his memories.

No— Perhaps from the very beginning, he had already…?

Kirito’s eyes gave Eugeo a fleeting glance. The strongest among the various emotions visible in those black eyes was a light that appeared to Eugeo as a plea for his trust.

His look immediately returned to Administrator who stood before him. Despite his stern expression, Kirito lightly spread his hands out with a somewhat bitter smile.

“…That said, the level of authority granted to me is equivalent to that of the people of this world, hardly anywhere near to yours, Administrator… no, Quinella-san.”

The moment he called out that name that had an odd ring to it, the smile on the highest minister’s beautiful face waned slightly.

However, that lasted only a moment as a smile, larger than before, rested upon Administrator’s glossy, pearl grey lips.

“So that shorty in the library room had been running her mouth off with those dull stories. …And? What exactly have you dropped into my world for, boy? And without any supervisor authorities too?”

“I do have some knowledge even if I lack those authorities.”

“Oh? For example? I have no interest in those meaningless tales of the past.”

“Then how about one from the future?”

Kirito faced the highest minister with his two hands placed upon the black sword thrust in the floor. The grave expression returned, straining the area near his cheeks, as a keen light shone in his black eyes.

“Quinella-san, you will destroy your world in the near future.”

The smile showed on Administrator's lips only deepened even after she heard those impactful words.

"…I will? Not you who had brought so much suffering upon my adorable dolls, boy, but me?"

"Yes. After all, your mistake was in establishing the Order of the Integrity Knights for opposing all intrusions from the Dark Territory… no, its establishment was a mistake in itself."

"Fufu. Ufufufu."

Likely having her mistakes pointed out for the first time ever since she became the ruler, the highest minister's finger touched her lips while her shoulders shook as though holding back strong laughter.

"Fufufu. That certainly sounds like what that shorty would say. It seems that shorty had learned some new tricks, to think she managed to ensnare a boy with such an appearance. How pitiful… both that child who had chased after me so and this boy who got caught up in that in his carelessness."

The highest minister's laughter continued through her slender throat.

Kirito's mouth opened to speak further, but the austere reverberations of a sharp voice rang out a moment quicker.

"If I may have a word, Esteemed Highest Minister."

The one who took a step forward with her armor clanging was Integrity Knight Alice who had kept her silence thus far. Her long golden hair gleamed beautifully in the moonlight as though opposing Administrator's glossy silver hair.

"The consideration regarding the inability of the current Order of the Integrity Knights to perfectly handle the combined invasion from the forces of darkness expected to soon arrive is one likewise shared by his Excellency, Knight Commander Bercouli, as well as Deputy Commander Fanatio-dono. And… I, too, am of agreement. Naturally, we, the Order of the Integrity Knights, are prepared to fight to our last knight, but Esteemed Highest Minister, do you possess the means of protecting the innocent common folk after our demise? I highly doubt even you believe yourself to be capable of exterminating the extensive forces of that land by your own hand alone!"

Knight Alice's forceful yet beautiful voice blew across the hall like a refreshing breeze, swaying Administrator's hair. With her smile slipping away, the highest minister stared down at the golden knight with an expression containing mere traces of surprise.

And Alice's words were a shock to Eugeo in a different way.

Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty. A provisional personality residing in the body of his precious childhood friend, Alice Schuberg.

The girl should have been a cold-headed enforcer of the law as shown when she landed that nasty hit on Eugeo's cheek at the academy's grand hall several days ago. Knight Alice should completely lack those many emotions that Alice once had: gentleness, innocence, and above all else, affection.

However, Knight Alice's previous words seemed exactly like what Alice would have said, had she stayed as she was and grew into an integrity knight.

Showing no sign she noticed the look from Eugeo who was swallowing his breath, the integrity knight stabbed the Fragrant Olive Sword into the floor with a shrill clang and argued further.

"Esteemed Highest Minister, I have mentioned that your obsession and deceit had led the Order of the Integrity Knights to ruins earlier. Obsession refers to your thief of all weapons and power from the inhabitants of the Human World, while deceit refers to how severely you had deceived us integrity knights! You had us part from our parents… our wives and husbands, our siblings, and sealed our memories away while planting false memories about how we were summoned from some imaginary Celestial World…"

Alice seemed to have hung her head down for an instant there. However, the knight immediately straightened her back and continued in a voice more resolute than before.

"…I would not have blamed you if it was necessary to protect this world and its inhabitants. However, why do you doubt our loyalty and respect towards the Axiom Church and you, Esteemed Highest Minister?! Why have you performed that corrupted ceremony on our souls to force us to submit to you?!!"

Eugeo looked on as several small drops fell from the smoothly curved contours that made up Alice's cheeks while she asked as though pouring out her heart.

Tears.

The integrity knight that had practically lost all emotions, Alice, was crying.

Eugeo swallowed his breath from the shock; before his eyes, the knight boldly threw her chest forward as she looked up towards the ruler without wiping her cheeks.

Despite pelted with words sharper than swords, Administrator showed a faint, cold smile as though she had felt nothing from them, treating them as beneath the level of a breath of air.

"My, my, Alice-chan. It seems you have grasped some pretty difficult ideas in your mind. It had only been five… or six years? That was all that had passed… since you were created."

The voice lacked solemnity, as it should, with it missing all emotion. However, its resonance was polished, resemblant of pure silver. Even the slightest warmth was absent from it.

"…I lacked trust in you *integrator units*, you say? That is a little disconcerting. I had placed so much trust on all of you… you are my adorable dolls, clicking into your positions like clockworks ever so gallantly, after all. Haven't you, too, polished your precious sword so meticulously for it to not rust, Alice-chan? It's the same. The *present* I had given all of you, those piety modules serve as the proof of my love. So that you dolls will remain beautiful for all eternity. So that you will not be bothered by those trivial worries and suffering the masses are prone to."

Administrator brought up her left hand with an aloof smile and spun the triangular prism in it with her fingertips. It was the upgraded piety module extracted from Eugeo's forehead.

Looking down upon Alice through the violet light, she gently whispered.

"Pitiful Alice-chan. Your beautiful face has gotten so disheveled. Are you feeling sad? Or perhaps angry? …If only you had stayed my doll, you would have been spared from those meaningless emotions for all eternity."

The soft sound the tears dripping down Alice's cheeks made as they fell onto her golden armor was accompanied by another: a rigid clink.

The Fragrant Olive Sword thrust at the knight's feet had pierced through the thick carpet and was sinking through even the marble flooring.

While putting in enough strength in her two hands to even damage the materials that made up the indestructible Central Cathedral, Alice forced out a quivering voice.

"…Uncle… his Excellency, Knight Commander Bercouli, have never worried nor suffered in the slightest throughout the never-ending days of the three hundred years he had lived as an integrity knight; are you of that opinion, Esteemed Highest Minister? Are you asserting that you are unaware of the grief that he, who had devoted the deepest loyalty to you, had continuously carried in his heart?"

A noticeably sharper twinge rang out from beneath the sword. Alice shouted at the same time with an intensity that exceeded that.

"His Excellency, Bercouli, had always been suffering throughout his mission to safeguard the loyalty towards the Axiom Church and the masses! You must have known that his Excellency had plead with the Chamber of Elders to bolster the imperial chivalric orders of the four empires, that are of no practical use, countless times! His Excellency… uncle was even aware of the seal carved into our right eyes. That is plainly evidence that he was the one who had suffered most, is it not?!!"

The questions stained with tears were practically asked with much pain—

However, even so, Administrator responded with a cool smile on her pale, beautiful features.

"…How disheartening. To think my love could be mistaken as one so shallow. I knew of those, naturally."

A tinge of cruelty peeked through her lovely smile—or so it seemed.

"I will tell you this, pitiful Alice-chan. It is not the first time number one… Bercouli had fretted over those worthless issues. In truth, that child had uttered those same thoughts around a hundred years before. Thus, I fixed him up."

A giggly chirp spilled from her.

"I had peeked into Bercouli's memories and erased aaaall of those worries crammed in there troubling him so. Not just him… the same goes for all of those knights that lasted for over a hundred years. I allowed them to forget all of those painful memories. Don't worry, Alice-chan. I won't get angry over this petty mischief from you. I will be sure to erase those memories causing that sorrowful face of yours. I will be sure to return you to a doll that has no need to think."

Administrator's suppressed laughter was all that shook within the leaden, cold silence.

That was no longer human.

As his shuddering surged anew and covered his body with goose bumps, Eugeo verified that fact.

The ability to erase and perhaps overwrite a human's memories as one wished. Eugeo had experienced that horror with his own body. Administrator had sealed his memories and turned him into an integrity knight who turned his sword towards Kirito and Alice after he recited that art consisting of merely three words.

If Administrator had conducted the Synthesis Ritual with the proper procedure, he would have likely never been able to regain his consciousness like so. She had used a gap already present in Eugeo's memories—though he did not understand why it was there—which resulted in his salvation.

However, he had yet to redeem himself for his sins. Eugeo could do nothing more than distract Chudelkin with an art during that battle. He could not forgive himself with merely that. He felt himself unworthy to even stand by Kirito's side now, shoulder to shoulder, to be perfectly honest…

He tightened his grip on the Blue Rose Sword hanging down from his right hand, then felt Kirito's gaze on his right cheek. However, Alice's low voice murmured before he had a chance to return the look.

"…Certainly, I feel enough torment and anguish to tear my chest apart in this moment. It is strange enough I could even stay on my feet."

Her voice quivered, but slowly regained its strength.

"…However, I do not wish for this pain… this emotion I am feeling for the first time to be erased. After all, this pain is what truly taught me that I am not a knight doll, but a single human. —Esteemed Highest Minister, I do not wish for your love. I have no need for your ministrations."

"…A doll that stopped being a doll."

Upon hearing Alice's words of parting, Administrator spoke in a tune.

"That is no human, Alice-chan. That is no more than a broken doll. Unfortunately, your thoughts are of no consequence. As long as I *synthesize* you again, every last bit of your emotions this moment will be erased, after all."

It was when the highest minister let out those horrid words with a gentle smile.

"Like what you've done to yourself—right, Quinella-san?"

Kirito, who had kept silent thus far, called to Administrator with that odd name once again.

Like earlier, the girl's smile dimmed upon hearing that.

"Now, boy, haven't I told you to put an end to those old stories?"

"Would the truth be erased if I do? Not even you could modify the past as you want. You could never erase the fact that you, too, was born as a human child, a single human being… isn't that so?"

I see; Eugeo agreed in his heart. Kirito must have heard about the stories regarding Administrator's true name and birth from the sage of the Great Library Room, Cardinal.

"Human… human, you say?"

The smile immediately returned to Administrator and she muttered in a tone different from before, somewhat filled with cynicism.

"When it's you who say those words, boy from «the other side», it has a rather complicated ring to it. In other words, boy, are you claiming yourself to be superior? That those of the Underworld are simply impertinent… is that what you wish to express?"

"No, no, nothing of that sort."

Kirito shrugged his shoulders and rejected the highest minister's words.

“On the contrary, those of this world are superior to the humans of the other side in many aspects. But they are both human at the base, possessing that same soul. You are no exception. No matter how many hundreds of years pass, a human could never possibly become a god, right?”

“…And what about it? Are you suggesting that we sit down for a cup of tea as fellow humans?”

“I’m all for that. …But what I meant was that as a human, you’re not some perfect existence; that’s what. Humans make mistakes. And yours is beyond repair. With the Order of the Integrity Knights partly destroyed, the Human World will be crushed if the combined invasion from the Dark Territory starts this moment.”

Kirito then took a glance towards Eugeo and continued in a hushed voice.

“…Two years ago, Eugeo and I had fought a group of goblins that trespassed from the opposite entrance deep in the cave going through the mountain range at the edge. The integrity knight in charge of that area must have overlooked them. And such incidents will occur more frequently from now. Eventually, that trespassing will turn into invading and this world you had worked so hard to preserve… or to keep in stasis will be exposed to merciless destruction and violence. Of course, I believe you have no desire for that either?”

“Big words for the one who went about breaking those knights, boy. Nonetheless, very well. And?”

“If you only wish for yourself to survive, you only have to restart after that… sure, you might be thinking that.”

Kirito spoke in a more forceful tone and shifted his right foot half a step forward.

“To bind the masses of darkness flowing into the Human World and the remaining humans with law, then making a new organization to rule over there… a Darkness Church, maybe? I doubt that will be beyond your ability, but still, that won’t be happening. There are people who truly hold absolute authority over this world on «the other side». This is what they will think… this time was a failure, let’s redo it from the start. And with a single press of a *button*, this entire world will be gone. The mountains, the rivers, the cities… and all of the humans, including you, will be wiped away in an instant.”

Kirito’s words had already exceeded Eugeo’s understanding.

The same probably went for Alice. She turned her face towards the black-haired swordsman with a questioning look, her eyes red at their edges.

However, it seemed the highest minister alone had perfectly understood what Kirito had said. The smile had nearly completely vanished from her lips and a frigid light flickered in her narrowed silver eyes.

"…I will admit that is unpleasant. To have someone tell me so clearly… that this world is a miniature garden that can be manipulated by some unknown being."

The supple fingers on her two hands interlocked and hid the bottom of her beautiful face. The voice uttered by her unseen lips had lost most of the playfulness it had when talking to Alice.

"However, in that case, what about you… those from «the other side»? Are you constantly aware of the possibility that your own world was created by some higher being and endeavor to please it with your progress?"

It appeared that question was beyond Kirito's expectations too.

Looking down at the swordsman who bit his lips and kept silent from above, Administrator softly brought herself up from that invisible chair and spread her hands out towards her sides. Her long legs, too, extended forward as though she was putting them on display. Her bare body possessed beauty that exceeded that of statues of the goddesses and lightly gleamed as it bathed in the moonlight, spreading an overwhelming sense of divinity into the hall.

"…Of course you don't. Your caprice had led to the creation of a world and the lives it has, and you will erase it the moment it lost its necessity. And you, boy of such a world, do you have the right to challenge my choices?"

The highest minister turned her eyes towards the ceiling… no, towards the distant night sky beyond the marble canopy and declared loudly.

"I would rather not. Flattering those playing as divine beings of creation and begging them for the continuation of one's existence are simply wretched. You should have known if you had heard those old tales from that shorty, boy… my sole reason to exist is to rule. That desire alone moves me and keeps me alive. These two legs are for walking forward and definitely not for bending down onto my knees to yield to another!!"

The air swirled with that roar and her pure silver hair ruffled greatly.

Overwhelmed by her intensity that allowed no reply, Eugeo unconsciously drew his right foot back. Administrator was the one who had overwritten Alice's memories, the enemy that neglected the nobles' depravity, but still, Eugeo had to admit once again that she was the mightiest ruler of the world—the absolute being, a demigod, that one without a family name like himself would never gain an audience with.

Eugeo's black-haired partner who had led him all this way, too, appeared overwhelmed with his upper body trembling, but he took a step forward instead of back. He stabbed the black sword in his right hand hard into the floor as though to give himself courage.

"—Then!!"

His speech was loud enough to shake the glass window behind.

“Then—do you intend to look away as the Human World is trampled upon and sit on a make-believe throne, as the ruler of a nation without citizens, while awaiting your own, lonely destruction?!!”

The instant she heard those words, the girlish part of Administrator’s beautiful face vanished, replaced by pure fury from the eternity she had lived through. However, that expression faded soon after and a whimsical smile adorned her pearl grey lips once again.

“Regarding that combined invasion business you mentioned, boy, it would truly be a disappointment if you had thought that I have nothing planned. I had an abundance of time to think… time alone is my ally, unlike for the people of the other side.”

“…So, you claim you have the means to prevent that end?”

“You may call them the means, and the goal too. I exist only to rule… there is no end to the limits of that.”

“What…? What do you mean?”

Administrator did not give an immediate reply to Kirito’s voice that sounded puzzled.

Instead, an enigmatic aura accompanied the smile on her lips before she lightly clapped her two hands together as if to declare the conversation over.

“I will let you hear the rest after you have become one of my dolls, boy. Of course, you too, Alice-chan, Eugeo. If I am to add one last thing… I have no intention to stay quiet in regards to not only the *reset* for the Underworld, but the «final load experiment» as well. The art for that purpose has already been completed. …Rejoice, I will grant you the opportunity to see it before anyone else.”

“……An art…?”

Kirito replied stiffly.

“You’re relying on the *system commands* that are filled with restrictions? Are you planning on exterminating all of the forces of darkness with some *command* only you can use? Despite how you can’t even handle the three of us right now?”

“Oh, really now?”

“Sure it is. You no longer have any chance at victory. Alice can stop any long-range offensive arts in several seconds while Eugeo and I will slice into you in the meantime. If you’re thinking of paralyzing us with a *command* that requires you to touch us, I will cut you with the skill I defeated Chudelkin with earlier. —I don’t want to say this now either, but a single art practitioner unprotected by any vanguards cannot win against multiple swordsmen. That should be an absolute rule even in this world.”

“Single… single, you say?”

Administrator giggled in her throat.

“It’s nice how you pointed that out. Yes, the numbers are the issue in the end. My control is limited when there are too many pawns. Or at the very least, the final load experiment would be too much. I had added to the Order of the Integrity Knights while maintaining that *balance*, but…”

The mightiest ruler who should had no more than herself remaining after losing her loyal subject, Chudelkin, displayed boundless composure before the three rebels as she spoke to herself.

“To be honest, the chivalric order was merely **the means to an end**. The military might I truly desire need not think, let alone possess memories or emotions. It only needs to be an existence devoted to slaughtering the enemies before its eyes without end. In other words… there is no need for it to be human.”

“…What are you…”

Ignoring Kirito’s words, Administrator raised her left hand up high. Gripped within was a triangular prism, glistening with a bewitching violet—it was the piety module extracted from Eugeo’s forehead.

“He might have been a foolish clown, but even Chudelkin did have his use. He did grant me the time to assemble every last segment of this lengthy art, after all. Now… awaken, my faithful servant! The soulless executioner!!”

Eugeo understood upon hearing those words.

It was the art that resounded quietly from the depths of the bed when he returned to this room after regaining his senses. An absurdly long sacred art that was considered to be most advanced even by the highest minister’s standards, with an incantation that she could not shorten using the power of her mind. That very art was about to be released in this moment.

What the silver-haired girl loudly sang out next were two words that were far too short to interrupt yet possessed a trepidation that exceeded all other phrases.

“*Release recollection*!!”

The core of the armament full control art. The secret art to release a weapon’s memories and draw out power beyond all sacred arts—

However, the nude Administrator had absolutely nothing on herself, not even a small knife. Could it be the piety module she held in her left hand? However, that triangular prism should have no memories that could be released.

A quiet yet definite sound pricked Eugeo's ears as he looked up towards the highest minister on the other side in shock.

Clink, clink; the shrill noises of metal came from behind… no, he heard from the right and left.

Eugeo quickly turned about and a sharp gasp came out from him due to an overwhelming surprise.

There were countless pillars encircling the broad hall that measured forty mel across. The imitation swords, gleaming golden and made in various sizes, attached to them trembled slightly.

"What… what is…!?"

Eugeo's quivering voice was accompanied by a single "Impossible…!" from Alice.

The largest among the imitation swords reached a length of three mel. Not even Administrator could wave such a thing around easily. In the first place, the sword Eugeo looked at was not the only one that was vibrating. That same phenomenon had occurred on every one of the pillars positioned around the hall. The number of imitation swords likely amounted up to thirty.

The recollection release art could not be used unless a weapon was on such a degree of familiarity that it was practically a part of yourself—or it should. The cherished sword's memories could only be first accessed after it was connected with its wielder by deep bonds.

The highest minister who thought of her subordinates as mere tools could not possibly form such bonds with all thirty of those imitation swords. Thus, what exactly were those memories she released, and what was the sword—?

Before the three who stood still, an extraordinarily intense reverberation roared out and the gigantic swords left their pillars as they floated upwards.

With one grazing Eugeo's hair as he stooped over in a fluster, the swords spun violently as they soared up and gathered in the air directly above the highest minister, in the middle of the hall. A phenomenon that was even more astonishing than before occurred without delay.

The thirty swords of various sizes let out metallic clanks as they connected and assembled into a gigantic mass. Eugeo immediately noticed that appeared somewhat similar to a human's silhouette.

A thick backbone stabbed through its core while its long arms extended towards its sides. Legs sprouted from its underside: four of them, twice that of humans.

Turning towards the swords that swiftly transformed into a bizarre giant, no, monster, Administrator held out the piety module gripped in her left hand.

—That triangular prism is the keystone to the highest minister's recollection release art.

Just as Eugeo thought so, Kirito shouted out from his side.

"*Discharge!!*"

He took a look and saw birds made from flames dwelling on the tips of his spread-out right hand. Kirito alone had chanted an art while Eugeo and perhaps Alice, too, were watching the swords uniting in shock.

The flaming birds shot out soared with the triangular prism Administrator held as their target. There were many variants of offensive arts using thermal elements, but the «*bird shape*» art Kirito used had the property to automatically home in on its destination. In addition, the highest minister's eyes were concentrated on the sword giant above her and did not notice Kirito's movement. It should hit—!

Eugeo was confident.

The sword giant extended out one of its leg while afloat and intercepted the flaming birds. Unable to dodge, the birds crashed into it and instantly scattered into crimson drops. The gleaming, golden sword's surface was merely covered in a faint layer of soot; it showed no sign of damage.

As for Administrator, she had completely ignored that single act and softly released the triangular prism in her left hand. Rather than her throwing it, the triangular prism rose on its own, drawn towards its interior beyond the three swords that made up the giant's back.

The violet light slowly ascended, coming to a stop where the giant's heart would have been, had it been a living creature, and then let out a significantly stronger glow.

That radiance diffused through the giant's entire body and the countless swords, once with rounded, ornamental blades, gained sharp edges as a metallic noise rang out. In that instant, Eugeo understood, instinctively, that the highest minister's art had been completed.

Administrator smiled with her eyes narrowed.

The sword giant spread its four legs out and soared through the air—positioning itself directly in between the highest minister and the trio, and landed with rumble of a dull tremor.

Eugeo looked up in silence at the strange, gigantic mass, likely over five mel in height.

Its spine and ribcage, and even its two arms and four legs were all assembled by golden, imitation—no, actual—swords. Like a toy made by a child from whittled wood branches… or perhaps a bone monster inhabiting the farthest reaches of the land of darkness.

"…Impossible…"

That murmur that sounded somewhat like a moan came from Knight Alice.

“Using a full control art of such a grand scale on multiple… let alone thirty weapons would be inconsistent with the principles behind that act. Even for you, Esteemed Highest Minister, violating the fundamental principle of sacred arts should not be possible… what exactly have you…”

Alice’s voice had likely reached Administrator’s ears as well, but the girl floating behind the sword giant ignored her question and displayed a satisfied, muffled laugh instead.

“Ufufu… fufu, fufufu. This is truly the power I desired. Pure might capable of fighting on for all eternity. A name… yes, I suppose calling it a «*sword golem*» will do fine.”

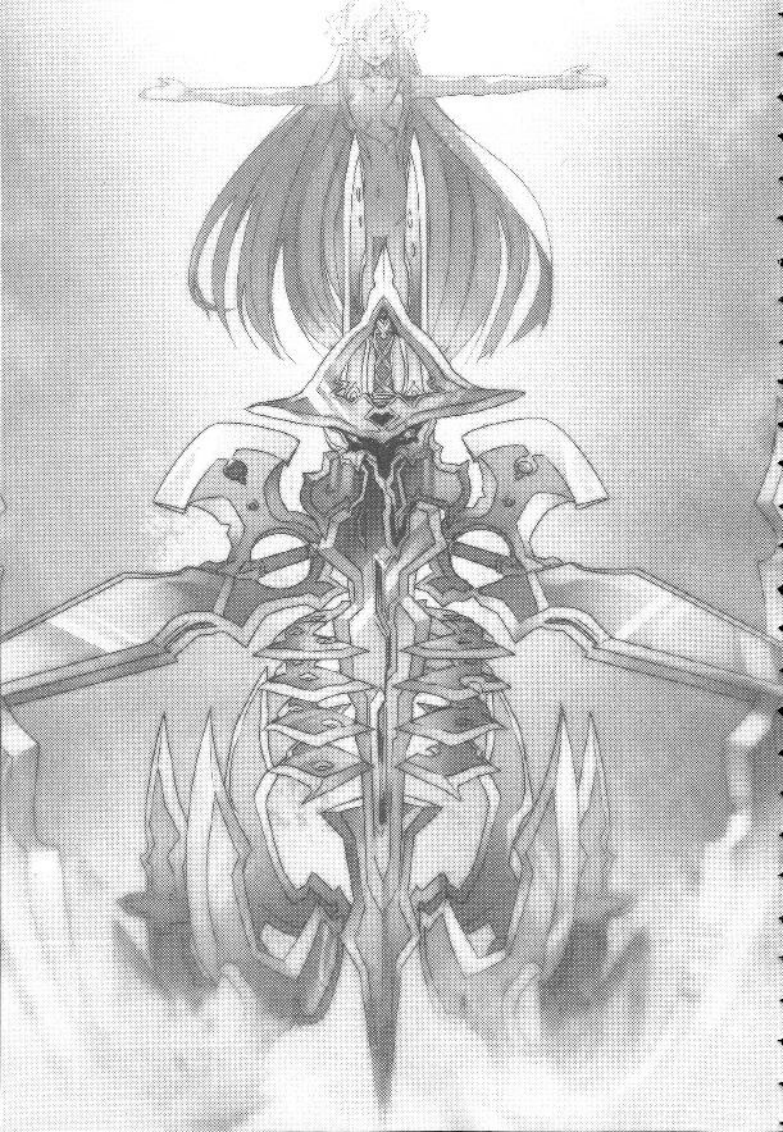
Despite the situation as it was, Eugeo still guessed at the meaning behind the unfamiliar Sacred Tongue term.

He knew «*sword*» was a word that referred to swords. However, «*golem*» had never appeared in any of the textbooks used in the academy. Even Alice who should be far more proficient in the Sacred Tongue than Eugeo appeared to be at a loss.

The short silence was punctured by Kirito’s hoarse muttering.

“A sword… automaton.”

That translation into Common Tongue appeared to be accurate somehow. Administrator’s smile broadened and she lightly clapped her hands together.



“I knew you would be proficient in the Sacred Tongue… no, in English. How about becoming my secretary instead, if you prefer that over being a knight? I would need you to drop your sword, apologize for your insolence, and pledge eternal allegiance towards me this very moment, however.”

“Unfortunately, I doubt you would believe an oath from me. Besides… I hadn’t admitted my loss just yet.”

“I have nothing against that strong spirit, but I certainly cannot accept such a fool. Perhaps you actually believe you can defeat my golem… or anything of that sort? This doll made from swords possessing priorities on the level of a sacred tool? The mightiest weaponry that I had devoted every last sector of my precious memory space to complete…?”

Weaponry; he had heard of that term once.

It should have been mentioned in Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio’s speech. When the highest minister tried to focus Solus’s light onto a single point with a thousand panes of mirrors, so as to cause a flame of extreme heat without the usage of sacred arts, long ago in the past. The highest minister had called that trial, a «weaponry experiment»—

So weaponry was effectively a tool that exhibited sufficient power to exceed sacred arts? And the sword golem standing beyond their eyes now was the completed form of that weaponry… was that it?

Perhaps having caught sight of the expressions the trio had on as they stood still, Administrator showed a cold smile as she slowly swung her right hand.

“Now… fight, golem. Crush your enemies.”

As if it had been awaiting that command all that while—

The heart of the sword giant shone brilliantly with violet light.

The four-legged monster immediately charged forth with a metallic roar.

The size of the sword golem could not match the flaming clown created by Chief Elder Chudelkin earlier. However, the looming monstrosity with its countless clinking joints inspired frigid fear in Eugeo’s heart.

The first to respond to the golem whose two arms, each made from three swords, swung up high was Knight Alice who had been looking on in a daze until now. Slower by merely half a second, the knight resolutely met the monster’s assault from the front.

“Yaaaaahh!!”

Her loud battle cry overwhelmed the metallic noises from the golem. Alice's two hands gripped onto the Fragrant Olive Sword and she bent her body to its limit before swinging it down.

Kirito, too, began moving then. Leaping forth towards its left, he circled about the golem's flank.

Despite engulfed in fear and frozen still, Eugeo still managed to guess at Kirito and Alice's aim.

Both of them had judged that the joint between the golem's spine and four legs, the part where a human's pelvis would be, could be a potential weakness if it even had one to begin with. However, it would be far too hazardous to target its pelvis with a frontal attack. Hence, Alice would be the bait and draw the golem's attention—if it even had one, however—while Kirito would cut apart the enemy's vital point from the flank. A strategy fundamentally the same as the one they had defeated Chudelkin with.

Eugeo watched on, feeling both deep amazement and mild torment over how the pair could immediately begin a combination attack without any prior discussion.

Alice's sword rushed down an arc, leaving behind traces resembling the light of Solus.

The monster's right arm, too, swung down with a thundering roar. An impact great enough to sway the entire cathedral blew outwards the moment the large and small gleaming, golden blades clashed, slamming against Eugeo as a gust.

Two seconds had passed since the pair's assault.

And then, any and all conflict that could actually be considered a "battle" ended in that instant.

Alice's Fragrant Olive Sword—a best among the best of the sacred tools, one possessing an «eternal immortality» property—was easily flicked away by the Golem's right arm.

Unable to pull back the sword surging backwards, the knight was slightly lifted off the floor with her balance destroyed.

Targeting Alice as she desperately tried to stay on her feet without falling over, the golem's left sword thrust forth at a speed faster than eyes could follow.

A dull noise resounded, one far too plain when compared to the earlier clash. But at the same time, that was the sound that had concluded the battle.

The tip of the brutally gigantic sword appeared from Alice's slender back and splattered drops of deep crimson. Her long, beautiful golden hair gently flowed while doused in fresh blood.

Her golden breastplate, split into two, instantly lost its Life and both sides shattered into pieces. The Fragrant Olive Sword fell from the knight's right hand and tumbled onto the floor.

And finally, the golem's left sword nonchalantly pulled out, leaving the integrity knight to fall forward.

"U… aaaah!!"

A shout that sounded like a scream.

It had surged out from Kirito. The black-haired swordsman who was circling towards the giant's right savagely charged in with a queer light in his two eyes.

The black sword released a vivid blue glow. It was the secret move, «Vertical».

The golem would likely stop if the piety module stored in its back was broken, but the thick blades protecting it and the difference in altitude denied the secret move from reaching. Hence, Kirito's aim was the joint between the golem's spine and legs. Certainly, the giant would be rendered immobile if that exposed part was broken.

The golem, having just swung down its two arms, should lack all means of guarding.

However, immediately after Kirito's sword moved.

The top half of the giant rotated with intense fervor using its spine as an axis. The giant's left arm, turning about horizontally in a movement impossible for humans, slashed at Kirito from his side.

A dull clink from the clash. Kirito had diverted the trajectory of his secret move with superhuman reflexes and met the golem's assault.

However, the scene Eugeo saw a moment ago repeated itself in his sight.

Unable to endure the impact, Kirito floated upwards. Without delay, the golem's left rear leg lunged out, drawn towards his unarmored chest.

The dull noise resounded once more. Blown away from the side, Kirito crashed into the window in the east. A horrifying amount of fresh blood dyed the glass before the black-clothed swordsman slid off and crumbled onto the floor.

Unable to make even a single sound, Eugeo stared on as a puddle of blood spread out from beneath his partner who had collapsed facing down.

His legs and arms felt absolutely nothing. It felt like his body belonged to someone else; he could do nothing to restrain its trembling.

All he could move was his face and Eugeo slowly turned it up, towards the sword golem in his path a mere five or six mel away. The monster, too, looked straight down at Eugeo. The sword

hilts at the peak of its spine appeared just like a face. The jewels inset on the two aligned guards blinked irregularly like eyes.

Capable of neither movement nor speech, Eugeo merely repeated a single word within his paralyzed mind.

—These are all lies.

—Lies. This is all one big lie.

Knight Alice and Kirito could be said to be the strongest experts in the Human World now. Even with some strange monster or some sort of «weaponry» as their opponent, the pair should not be losing like this. They will stand right back up this very moment and ready their swords once……

Hehe. Hehehe.

Quiet laughter streamed on, accompanying the solemn, metallic noises constantly let out by the golem.

His sight moved and saw the highest minister, Administrator, floating behind and merrily looking down at the tragedy. Her specular eyes reflected nothing but the red from the blood flowing from Kirito and Alice. Not a single tinge of compassion resided within them.

The bizarre giant began moving once more to execute its master's commands.

Bringing up its right front foot, it took a long step, and thrust that down into the floor with a metallic clunk. Followed by its left front foot.

Red drops dyed the looming giant's left arm. Eugeo decided that, at the very least, he would die from a slash by that arm. His fear was no more and the world was silent, far too silent—

Without warning, a voice burst in his mind like a bubble; it took a moment before he realized it was real.

[Use the dagger, Eugeo!]

It was a female voice with a somewhat deep yet charming reverberation.

The voice was too unfamiliar for a hallucination on the verge of death. Taking a glance down towards his right, Eugeo saw—

Something atop the collapsed Kirito's right shoulder at the mere size of the tip of one's nail, a pitch-black spider.

It was impossible for such a tiny bug to talk. However, something in that voice urged Eugeo to believe. All doubts over the owner of that voice were dispelled from his paralyzed consciousness while the small creature brought up its right front leg as if berating him.

“It… it won’t work. That dagger won’t reach Administrator.”

He answered in a small voice and the spider violently waved its raised feet.

[No! A passage! Stab it into the elevating disk on the floor!!]

“Eh…”

Eugeo opened his eyes wide, dumbfounded. The black spider focused its four eyes, glistening like rubies, on Eugeo and continued.

[I will buy you time! Hurry!!]

The spider, crying out while the adorable fangs peeking out from its mouth shifted about, glanced at Kirito’s pallid cheek and softly touched it with its right foot, before leaping towards the floor.

By the time it soundlessly touched down onto the floor, the miniscule spider—

Turned towards the sword golem, likely tens of thousands times its size, and ran straight.

3

I thought I had conquered enduring physical pain to some extent.

Slightly more than two years ago, I crossed swords with goblins that intruded from the Dark Territory at the cave north of Rulid Village. During the battle, I got my left shoulder cut by the machete belonging to the leader of the goblins and despite how it was far from lethal, the overwhelming pain—or to be accurate, the fear of suffering pain—made me cower, nervous, and rendered me immobile.

That experience exposed my weak point in the Underworld. Perhaps due to the long time I spent fighting in worlds lacking pain, thanks to the pain absorber function installed in the Nerve Gear and AmuSphere, I had lost my resistance towards it.

Since then, I had controlled myself to not shrink back any longer when attacked by wooden swords during practice with Eugeo or the academy’s matches and perhaps as a result, the injuries I suffered in my fights with the integrity knights had not left me frozen in fright, at the very least. After all, in the Underworld, you could fully recover even with your hands and feet sliced off as long your Life did not reach zero.

But—

Right before the very end of this long journey, I was taught the bitter lesson that I had never actually managed to conquer myself at all.

«Sword golem», the military weaponry created by the highest minister, Administrator, possessed extraordinary power and speed. It had transcendental performance that deviated from even the rules of this world. It was already a miracle that I managed to block that first attack from its left arm; the second using its left rear leg was faster than my eyes could even follow.

The sword that served as the golem's leg seemed to have torn through my internal organs, from my right to my left. I was aware of an icy chill caressing my stomach at the time of that heavy blow, but what I felt as I flew through the air, crashed into the window, and tumbled onto the floor was a pain rushing through my entire body as if I was being immolated. None of my fingers could move while the lower half of my body had no sensation at all. It wouldn't be strange even if my body had actually been split into two with only a single layer of skin joining them.

It was a real mystery how I retained my ability to think.

Or perhaps that was because the pain was far exceeded by my despair.

My Life should be falling at a rate faster than ever before. I must have no more than a few minutes left before it touches zero.

And Integrity Knight Alice probably had even less time remaining. The golden knight, collapsed on the floor a distance away, was stabbed through her chest by the sword golem's sword. It appeared she avoided a direct hit to her heart, but her blood must be spilling out at an alarming rate. The chance that not even healing arts of the highest grade could stop that was high. That miraculous fluct light that broke through the «seal of the right eye» applied on all Underworld inhabitants with its will alone was being extinguished before my eyes.

The life of my irreplaceable bosom friend, Eugeo, who stood outside my field of vision was like a candle in the wind too. His strength had already surpassed mine, but that was no enemy that swordsmanship could stand up to.

My hazy vision showed the sword golem advancing, causing tremors as it did.

Even when I tried to call for him to flee, only a weak breath spilled out from my mouth.

No, even if I could call out to him, Eugeo would not run. He would grip his Blue Rose Sword and stand up against this overwhelming enemy to save Alice and me.

This worst disaster could only be attributed to my miscomprehension—the foolish assumption that Administrator would not murder.

In the Great Library Room, the sage, Cardinal, had explained the essence of what made up the «taboos» in this world with a tea cup. What she had wanted to convey was that all taboos had their own loopholes. Administrator had probably broke through the restriction on herself by creating an automatic weapon to slaughter her enemies instead of doing it with her own hands.

The pain that seemed to rage like flames was gradually turning into a dull numbness.

My Life will soon be zero. I would probably be kicked out from this world in that instant, wake up in the STL, and staff from Rath will fill me in. About the deletion of the Underworld in its current state—along with every fluct light, including Alice and Eugeo, without exception.

If my Life held just as much meaning as Eugeo and the rest.

If only I could meet a true death with this pair here.

How could I apologize to them with anything less than that?

The four advancing legs of the sword golem and the radiance of the collapsed Alice's golden hair flickered and quivered in my slowly darkening vision.

Even that light, too, steadily abandoned me.

That was when that soft, yet substantial, voice burst into my ears.

[Use the dagger, Eugeo!]

It had a velvety ring that I seemed to have heard from somewhere. I continued listening to the exchange between the mezzo-soprano's voice and Eugeo with my mind blank.

The owner of that voice gave several short instructions before declaring that she would buy him time and moving to my ear. It felt like something warm had touched my right cheek for an instant.

That warmth brought back a speck of sensation to my body and I desperately lifted my half-fallen eyelids.

Before my eyes, the one who leapt down onto the carpet stained with my blood without a sound—

Was one extremely, extremely small spider gleaming with a lustrous black.

That could be no other. Charlotte. The familiar of the sage, Cardinal, who lurked about my vicinity for two years to collect information.

But why was she here now? This small spider should have been released from her duty by her master in the Great Library Room and disappeared into the gaps between those bookshelves.

Pain and fear left my mind for a moment from the overwhelming surprise; the creature that was far too small began her charge towards the gigantic golem before my eyes.

Her four slender legs wildly kicked off the carpet. However, the distance crossed by the spider in a step was no match for that of the golem. Just how did she plan to buy time with the golem lunging at Eugeo?

Or so I wondered before a weak gasp leaked out from me, assailed by an even great shock.

The black spider had become a size larger.

Each time her pointed legs thrust onto the floor, the size of the spider rapidly multiplied. She became bigger than a mouse, a cat, soon a dog, and continued growing larger even then. Before I knew it, my cheek that touched the floor could feel the heavy tremors from Charlotte's legs kicking off the carpet.

"—Gigii!"

Letting out a grinding, metallic noise, the sword golem finally took notice of Charlotte. The two gems at its face flickered as though appraising its enemy.

"Shaaaa!"

Emitting a shrill, intimidating cry, the black spider whose overall length had crossed two meters, too, had its four individual eyes shine with a keen light.

Though her height failed to reach even half of the golem's, the enlarged Charlotte had her body covered by a tough-looking carapace in contrast to her enemy formed solely from slender, long swords. The jet-black shell gleamed like the Rasta colors tinged with gold in the light and the claws growing on her eight legs, too, were like black crystals.

Two of her legs were visibly larger, serving as her arms, and their claws were long enough to bear a resemblance to swords as well. Raising that right leg up high, Charlotte threw it down at the golem's left leg.

A heavy, metallic impact, like a clash between greatswords, echoed throughout the room. The orange sparks created illuminated the murky hall with dazzling light.

That flash of light brought to attention Eugeo's figure that had started running without my notice.

Not towards the golem. Nor was it towards Alice or me.

He dashed towards the circular pattern on the southern wall to carry out Charlotte's instructions to stab the dagger into the elevating disk.

Behind Eugeo, though that single strike from Charlotte had broken the sword golem's stance slightly, it effortlessly stood its ground and was just about to raise its right arm up high.

The golem seemed to have completely identified the sudden, gigantic black spider as its enemy and its two bluish-white eyes shone sharply as it swung down its right arm with a roar.

Charlotte met that attack with her left arm.

The sword of gold and claw of black crystal crashed in mid-air and brought forth a fierce shockwave once more. The tremor travelling through the floor shook through my body as well.

That single strike from the sword golem that easily blew away both Alice and me was taken on by the large spider as she deeply lowered the six legs at her rear.

The pair continued that same ferocious struggle in an attempt to force the other down. The tough carapace on Charlotte's legs warped as she supported that massive weight while the three swords forming the golem's right arm creaked at their joints as well.

The competition ended in a mere three seconds.

The one to break with a dull noise was Charlotte's left front leg. Milky white fluid gushed from the intersection, dyeing her black carapace.

However, the spider did not even take a step back and lunged forth with her remaining right front leg. Her aim was the gap between the three huge swords making up the sword golem's back. The violet light gleaming within it—the piety module.

Her claw that reached out like a black flash of lightning stabbed through the prism, the golem's greatest weakness—that moment I saw that, the numerous swords lined up on the left and right of its spine as its ribcage moved as one.

Jakiiin!! A metallic noise like a paper cutting machine rang out. The four blades on each side had intersected. Held within them, Charlotte's right leg was helplessly severed and a flood of bodily fluid spurted out once more.

The golem's ribcage opened slowly and the torn half of her leg fell from inside. Perhaps convinced of its victory, the golem's two eyes faintly flickered with what looked practically like ridicule.

Charlotte retained her gallantry even with her two front legs lost.

Letting out a shrill cry once again, she leapt forth to bite with the thick, short fangs growing from her mouth.

However, her attack did not reach. The golem's leg kicked up faster than my eyes could follow, slicing off another two of Charlotte's left legs, and the giant spider fell onto the floor with a thud, its balance destroyed.

That's enough—run.

I tried to shout.

I had never conversed directly with that black spider named Charlotte.

But she had always been watching over me. She even told me the zephyria flowers I grew in the dormitory's flower beds could still be saved after Raios and Humbert tore them apart. Despite how her mission from Cardinal had only been to observe me.

Yes—she should not be dying in such a hopeless battle for nothing more than to buy some time.

Run; I tried shouting once again, but it failed to make any sound.

Getting up somehow with her four remaining legs, Charlotte lowered herself to launch yet another reckless charge.

But the golem's left arm that came from straight above an instant quicker pierced deep into the black spider's torso after tracing an elegant arc.

"……Ah…"

A noise, far too weak to be considered a scream, spilled out from my throat.

—That happened then.

A sudden violet flash blotted out my vision.

It was a radiance I had only seen once before. The bands of light sweeping through the hall were all sets of miniscule letters. This same light had come forth when I used the dagger Cardinal gave me to help Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio.

Eugeo must have reached the elevating disk and stabbed in the dagger he had. I was not sure what result that would lead to, but Eugeo had not wasted the time Charlotte bought with that assault she carried out at the risk of her life.

Bathed in the gradually fading light, the jet-black spider pawed at the floor with her remaining legs, as though she wanted to stand even with her body stabbed all over. However, her gigantic body powerlessly sank in a puddle of white blood after the golem withdrew its arms with a damp noise.

The four individual eyes lined up on her face had lost most of that vivid scarlet that resembled rubies. Having confirmed the state of the elevating disk with those eyes, Charlotte murmured with a weak voice as blood spilled from even the gaps between her fangs.

[Thank goodness... I made it.]

Her right legs shook and altered the direction she faced. Her four eyes stared gently at me.

[I am glad... I could, fight... with you... in the.....]

Her words ceased as though they had dissolved in mid-air. The crimson light in her glossy, round eyes flickered and vanished.

As my sight gently blotted out, I realized my tears could still flow now even while I approached death myself. The giant black spider shrank silently. The white puddle, too, swiftly evaporated, leaving behind nothing but a corpse the size of my fingertip, facing upwards with its four legs drew in.

The sword golem turned about as though it had instantly lost all concern for that life it had severed while its two shining eyes caught sight of Eugeo.

The giant form turned by ninety degrees and heavily stabbed the tip of its extended foot onto the floor. The ribbons of violet light continued wavering where it advanced towards.

I strained with all my strength to move my neck by several centimeters and the source of the light came into sight.

A ring of light pulsated on the floor at the southern side of the circular hall, a short distance from the glass window. It was the elevating disk Alice and I had used to get to this hundredth floor.

Something like an extremely small cross was stabbed in the middle of that ring. It was Eugeo’s share of the reddish-copper daggers Cardinal had entrusted us with. Those daggers were created from the resources taken from the pigtails that she grew for two hundred years and could open a channel that transcended space between Cardinal and whatever it was stabbed into.

Eugeo had stabbed the final resort against Administrator into the elevating disk in the floor as instructed by Charlotte, the black spider.

The elevating disk was already completely shining with violet light. High frequency waves like many tuning forks resonating with each other swelled out as the dagger itself came apart at last, connecting the elevating disk and the canopy with a narrow beam of light.

Eugeo who stood still beside it covered his face with his left arm, unable to bear its radiance. The sword golem advancing towards him, too, had its joints creak to a stop as though hesitating over the unexplainable phenomenon.

The beam of light gradually grew in width. A glossy, dark brown surface—a board—appeared from within it. No, that was no normal board. Rimmed by a rectangular frame, it had a silver knob protruding from one side; it was a door.

Just as I realized that, the radiance gave an intense flash, then vanished. The high frequency waves receded as well and silence returned to the hall.

Both Eugeo and I looked towards the thick door with a familiar design and color in silence.

Perhaps its program resumed after the abnormality had settled down, but the sword golem took a step forward with its right leg.

In that moment—

A small, stiff noise shook the air gently, but surely.

The silver knob slowly rotated. The stiff sound soon echoed out once more, followed by the door opening quietly.

The door stood upon the floor by itself, so there should be no more than the same hall beyond it. But on the contrary, no moonlight filtered through the gap between the wooden frame and door. Its depths were submerged in absolute darkness.

The door continuing swinging open and stopped upon opening a gap of around fifty centimeters. Its contents remained hidden from view. The sword golem continued its advance, ignoring the door. Its huge swords would be within range to cut Eugeo within three steps… two—

Without warning, an astounding intensity of light flooded out from the darkness beyond the door.

A pure white flash of lightning horizontally surged forth.

Gagaan!! Its impact made a noise that assailed my ears beyond any other sacred arts I had ever witnessed. The lightning that landed directly on the sword golem squirmed like a living being and turned its giant form into a black silhouette.

The lightning attack raged for several seconds before finally receding and the golem, which seemed to boast of a durability close to invulnerability, came to a stop as its upper body swayed. Faint white smoke rose from the tens of swords and its two eyes flickered haphazardly.

The monster that tenaciously tried to continue moving was struck hard once again by another lightning bolt emitted from the door. It was an unbelievable rate of fire for a sacred art of such power which should require an incantation consisting of tens of lines. With various parts charred black, the golem let out a shrill groan as it took a step back, but was chased down a mere half-second later.

A peal of thunder more intense than before roared out and a third bolt of lightning dashed forth. Struck by the white light, thicker than the two before, the five meters tall military weaponry was easily blown away like a paper model. Whirling about in mid-air, it passed through the immediate right of the hovering Administrator and crashed down onto the floor at the far end of the hall. I felt the Central Cathedral itself quivering from the impact of its fall.

The upturned golem finally ceased movement, but the tips of its sword limbs still trembled in small motions showing that its Life had yet to be depleted. But still, it seemed unlikely for it to get to its feet any time soon.

I shifted my sight back and watched the darkness beyond the door once more.

I already knew for sure who would be appearing from there. No one in this world was capable of rapid-firing such immense sacred arts aside from the highest minister, Administrator, and one other.

What first appeared from beyond the darkness were a narrow staff and the petite hand that held it. Following those was a loose sleeve upon a slender wrist. Several layers draped onto a black velvet robe. An angular hat decorated with a tuft. The flat shoes peeking out from the cuff of her robes took a step forward and stepped noiselessly onto the carpet.

The moonlight illuminated that soft-looking chestnut curly hair and those small silver-rimmed glasses. Her large eyes where youth and boundless wisdom coexisted sparkled beyond those lenses.

The sage, Cardinal, who possessed a level of authority equivalent to the highest minister, Administrator, as her other self and lived in the Great Library Room that was isolated for what was practically an eternality, calmly walked out into the bluish-white moonlight, and then stilled her feet. The door behind her closed on its own immediately after.

How could Cardinal reach this hall from that isolated library room?

The key was, of course, the reddish-copper dagger Eugeo held. The dagger stabbed into the elevating disk by Charlotte's instructions had connected that to Cardinal. In that case, using an art to change the destination linked to the elevating disk to the library room should be an easy task for the girl.

The petite sage scanned through the top floor of the cathedral that she was likely seeing for the first time with a stern expression like that of a teacher.

Next, she turned her eyes to Eugeo who stood at the side and gave a curt nod. She also stared hard at Knight Alice who laid prostrate a distance away. Shifting those eyes to me who was in a similar posture, she showed a slight smile as though to reassure me and nodded once again.

And finally—

Cardinal resolutely straightened up her small body and gazed at Administrator who continued hovering further in the hall in silence. The sage's side profile gave no hints of any intense emotions she might be holding in this confrontation against her ultimate enemy after two hundred years.

Having confirmed the situation, Cardinal softly raised the staff in her right hand. Her small frame instantly floated up and she glided through the air to where Alice and I had fallen.

Descending onto the floor, she first gave Alice's back a soft touch with the head of the staff. Gleaming particles of light fluttered and whirled about when she did, sinking into the knight's body.

Next, she knocked the slender staff against my shoulder. That warm light came forth once more and enveloped my body that had lost all sensation.

The cold sense of emptiness I felt, like I had ceased to exist, first vanished before a searing pain returned to my abdomen that had received a direct hit from the golem. I forced down the urge to scream and the pain was soon thawed by a wave of warmth. My bodily sensations returned just as the pain settled down and I tried flexing my stiff right hand countless times before feeling for the injury on my stomach with apprehension.

My touch revealed that though a stinging scar remained, the deep wound that nearly severed my body had been completely sealed up; I couldn't help but to be surprised. If I wanted to accomplish the same effect with healing arts, I would have to chant continuously for hours in a forest filled with sunlight.

I'm saved—such simpleminded happiness seemed even inappropriate for an art so miraculous, but naturally, compensation of equal value must have been needed. Not to mention the one to pay the price would not be me, but the sage, Cardinal. After all, the highest minister, Administrator, would never let—

As though utterly unconcerned over my spine-chilling imagination, Cardinal gently floated up once again.

The place she landed after a short while was before a small black corpse lying on the carpet.

The staff thrust onto the floor with a soft thud. Even as its owner's hand separated, the staff stayed upright without a smidgen of movement.

Cardinal quietly stooped over and gently scooped up the meager remains from the floor with both hands. Pressing the hands enveloping the black spider, Charlotte, to her breast, the girl hung her head deep down, then whispered in a voice so soft I couldn't catch it.

"You… stubborn thing. Have I not relived you of your duty, thanked you for your efforts, and asked you to live on as you wished in the nook of any bookshelf of your liking?"

Her long eyelashes fluttered twice, thrice, beyond her round glasses.

I gripped my black sword that had tumbled to my side with my right hand that could finally move properly, and then used that as a prop to stand. After wobbling closer to Cardinal, I shelved away those words I should be saying and instead, first asked.

“Cardinal… was that Charlotte’s… true form…?”

The sage whose curly hair swayed as she lifted her face looked at me with moist eyes and replied with a tone that seemed even nostalgic.

“…Many magical beasts and oddities dwelled in the forest and wildlands even in this Human World in times of old. You should already be familiar with such beings.”

“…*Named monsters*… But… Charlotte was capable of human speech and she even had emotions… Did she possess a fluct light…?

“Nay… In the words of your world, she would be equivalent to an NPC. Granted a modest pseudo-intelligence *engine* in a nook of the *Main Visualizer*, rather than a *light cube*, she was a part of the *system*, so to speak. Numerous large beasts, ancient trees, giant rocks, and such able to respond in the Common Tongue were positioned in the Human World too. However… they are all gone now. Half were exterminated by the integrity knights while the other half were used as *object resources* by that Administrator.”

“I see… So like the guardian dragon that had turned to bones in the cave at the northern mountain edge…”

“Aye. I had thought that a pity and took in as many of those newly created AIs as I could. Though many of those familiars I employ are small *units* without intelligence *engines*, there are some AIs in my care that I put to work like Charlotte. After all, they would not suffer much damage even after shrinking their outward appearance thanks to their high stats. She had stayed unharmed despite how much of a racket you caused while hidden in your clothes due to that.”

“B-But… but still…”

I stared hard on Charlotte’s corpse lying atop Cardinal’s palm and continued my questions while holding back the tears that threaten to spill yet again.

“Charlotte’s words and actions were in no way that of some false AI. She saved me. She sacrificed herself for me… Why… how could…”

“I believe I said this before, but this child had already lived for fifty years. She had continuously conversed with myself and watched over many humans in that time. Brief as it was, two years has already passed since she had clung to you… With that much time spent together, even without a fluct light, she—

Cardinal's tone suddenly increased in vigor and she finished her remaining words, decisively.

"Even if the true nature of that intelligence is naught more than input and output *data*, a true heart could still reside there. Aye, at times, even love. —Even an eternity would not suffice for you to understand that, however… Administrator, you empty vessel!!"

Calling out with an austere voice, the childlike sage finally turned her two eyes straight towards her bitter enemy of two hundred years.

Floating a distance away and watching over the situation in silence, the highest minister gave no immediate reply.

Her clasped hands covered her mouth, showing no more than a mysterious light in her specular eyes.

According to the story Cardinal told me in the library room, when Administrator merged with the former Cardinal System, she manipulated her fluct light and eliminated most of her emotions in order to prevent any revolt from the self-repair sub-process—the second personality that made up the base of the current Cardinal.

The danger of the sub-process possessing her body had passed after they separated into two unique humans, but still, she should have found emotions useless and have no need to revive them.

Hence, the image I had of the existence known as Administrator was a human being that processed tasks like a machine, one exactly like a computer program. But the highest minister I encountered on the top floor of this cathedral differed greatly from my imagination. I could sense nothing false about the smile she had as she held Chudelkin in contempt and toyed around with us.

And even now—

Silvery laughter burst out from the mouth the silver-haired, silver-eyed girl hid with both hands as her two eyes narrowed to slits.

Hehe. Hehe, hehe.

Treating Cardinal's words, said with utmost severity, as though they were less significant than even a breeze, her slender shoulders shook as she continued laughing.

Before long, she added a short line between her laughter—one that brought to life my earlier dread.

"I thought you would come."

Hehe, hehehehehehe.

“I thought you would come out from that moldy cellar if I teased these boys enough. That’s your limit, shorty. Sending your pieces to deal with me, yet not abandoning them like pawns should be. Humans certainly are beyond all help.”

As I had—

As I had feared, Administrator’s real aim was to lure Cardinal out from the isolated Great Library Room by pushing us to our limits. In other words, the highest minister still had some trump card capable of securing her victory in this situation.

But the sword golem, what should have been her ultimate weapon, was nearly destroyed by Cardinal and both Eugeo and I were capable of fighting somehow. A glance confirmed Alice should have regained her consciousness as well as she was trying to get up with her hand pressed against the floor.

Like the two sides of the same coin, Cardinal and Administrator would definitely end up in a draw if they fought each other one-on-one, so we should hold an overwhelming advantage with the situation as it was.

In other words, Administrator should have stopped spectating and begun an attack with all her might the moment the door connecting to the library room had opened. But why had she not opposed the destruction of the sword golem, Alice’s and my recovery, and not to mention that conversation between Cardinal and I that was in no way short?

Naturally, Cardinal should have the same misgivings as me. However, her side profile revealed only an adamant grimness.

“Hmm. It appears you, too, have gotten rather competent with that human mimicry of yours. Have you spent the whole of the last two hundred years honing that laughter before a mirror?”

Administrator sidestepped the harsh words once again with her laughter.

“My, the same goes to you, shorty, what were you thinking with that style of speech? You were shaking ever so miserably when you were brought before me two hundred years ago. Weren’t you, Lyceris-chan?”

“Do not call me by that name, Quinella! My name is Cardinal, a *program* that exists solely to delete you!”

“Ufufu, so you were. And I am Administrator, the one who manages all programs. I apologize for the late greeting, shorty. It took a little time to prepare the art for welcoming you.”

Finishing off with a smile, Administrator gently raised her right hand.

The outspread fingers bent as though they were crushing something invisible. Her cheeks that had remained pure white until now became faintly flushed and a fierce light entered her silver

eyes. Cold shudders ran down my back upon realizing the highest minister was seriously focusing for the first time.

But there was no time to do anything. An instant was all it took for Administrator to grip her right hand tight.

With that—

Gasshaaan!! A multitude of shattering noises clamored out from all about the hall. I thought the gigantic glass walls encircling it had all shattered.

However, that was wrong.

What broke was beyond the windows—the murky, snaking sea of clouds, the star-filled skies, the full moon shining clearly with bluish-white light: the whole of the night skies.

I looked on, dumbfounded, as the skies became countless thin fragments, whirled about, and dispersed, falling and breaking into ever small pieces as they crashed into other another. What appeared after the fragments that displayed the starry skies crumbled was a scene that could only be expressed as «nothingness».

The black and violet space that conveyed no depth made up a marbling pattern that wriggled viscously. An utterly blank world that would suck in anyone's mind if stared upon for too long.

It differed entirely in hue and beauty, but still, I felt it resembled the scene from then. The veil of white light I had once seen engulfing the sunset skies as the floating castle, Aincrad, crumbled.

The Underworld couldn't possibly be crumbling away and vanishing, could it? The Human World, the Dark Territory, the villages and cities… along with everyone living within them; everything?

What drew me back from my descent into panic was Cardinal's voice, firm and steadfast, though not entirely immune from shock.

"You… disconnected the *address*, haven't you?"

—What did she mean…?

I looked on, unable to tear my sight away from Administrator even in my confusion, and the silver-haired girl gently lowered her right hand as she replied in a whisper.

"….I certainly was the one at blame two hundred years ago when you escaped on the brink of death, shorty. That moldy cellar was personally set as a disconnected *address* by myself, wasn't it? Hence, I decided to learn from that mistake. To lock you in on this side the next time I lured you out. A cage for a rat to be hunted down by a cat."

Closing her mouth, the highest minister snapped her fingers with her left hand this time, as though to put on the finishing touches.

A breaking noise, rather modest when compared to earlier, immediately sounded out as the brown door towering behind shattered. Its fragments broke off into even smaller fragments while in mid-air, eventually disappearing. In addition, the circular pattern marking the elevating disk's position vanished from the floor as well.

Eugeo who stood beside it extended his right foot in shock and stomped on the carpet numerous times. Before lifting his face and giving a small shake of his head as he looked at me.

In other words, this was how it went.

What Administrator broke was not the world beyond the windows, but the actual connections between the world and the highest floor of the cathedral here.

Even if we somehow broke the surrounding glass windows, we couldn't go beyond it. Because there was nowhere to go to. As a method to shut away someone in a virtual space, it was far too perfect, truly one only permitted to those who held the authority of a supervisor. Compared to this, the jail area located in the Black Iron Castle on the first floor of the old Aincrad could be even considered naive.

Administrator didn't waste the few minutes since Cardinal's appearance, but used them to prepare for this grand art—that was it.

But.

If the connections between the spaces were completely severed.

"I believe that metaphor is lacking, however."

Apparently having easily reached the same conclusion as me, Cardinal rebutted in a low voice.

"Even if it takes only few minutes to disconnect them, re-connecting them is no easy task. Thus, you, too, are completely trapped in this place. And I believe it is hardly clear which faction would be the cat or rat in this situation. After all, we are four and you are one. You would be making a heavy mistake if you underestimate these younglings, Quinella."

Yes, that's right.

With things as they were, Administrator shouldn't be able to escape from this space easily herself. And both Cardinal and she were spell-users possessing the exact same capabilities. We could end the fight by slashing at her while Cardinal canceled out the sacred arts directed at us—that was what it summed up to.

But even after Cardinal explicitly pointed it out, the highest minister retained her faint smile.

“Four to one? …No, your calculations are just a little off. To be accurate… it would be four to three hundred. Even without including me, that is.”

The honeyed voice cut off just as the overturned clump of metal—the sword golem that should have been nearly destroyed—behind the highest minister resounded with ear-piercing dissonance.

“What…”

Cardinal shouted in a deep tone. She must have judged it completely nullified after being struck by the three consecutive bolts of lightning she shot with all her might. I had no problem believing in that either.

But the light in the golem’s two eyes that had definitely vanished just seconds ago now gleamed brilliantly like two stars. Directing that murderous light at us, the giant lifted itself up with its two arms as though it had recovered from its damage in an instant before thrusting its four legs onto the floor and standing straight with a thunderous roar from its abdomen.

A closer look showed that the set of swords that should have been charred at various spots from Cardinal’s lightning attacks had regained a fresh sheen without my notice.

It was true that weapons of high priority were furnished with the ability to regenerate their Life in this world, but that was only when they were properly maintained and sheathed. Still, recovering half of its health would take a whole day and in the first place, the swords forming the golem’s body were ornamental pieces attached to the pillars.

Even if all of its parts possessed priority levels equivalent to those of sacred tools like Administrator mentioned, that was no reason for them to recover from damage this quick.

But the sword giant towering behind the highest minister was enveloped in an aura exactly the same as—no, more overwhelming than what I had felt before it took on those lightning attacks. If this golem could be mass-produced, that might really be sufficient to fight back the combined invasion from the Dark Territory; its strength made even that seem plausible.

The young sage’s sonorous voice reached my ears as I stood still at a loss for words.

“Kirito, Alice, Eugeo, behind me! You must not move from behind me!”

Upon listening her instructions, the other two who weren’t already behind Cardinal from the start dashed over. It appeared the damage Alice suffered from getting the right of her chest pierced had almost fully recovered as well. She had lost her golden breastplate and a blue bodice, her clothes as a knight, underneath was badly torn, but her movements showed no traces of any wound.

Standing stoutly with her Fragrant Olive Sword, Alice softly whispered to me.

“Kirito… exactly who is this…?”

“Her name’s Cardinal. Another highest minister who fought with Administrator and got exiled two hundred years ago.”

And—in contrast to the one who manages (administrator), she was the one who resets (formatter). The one who shall return the world to a merciful null.

But naturally, I kept that to myself for now. I continued my explanation to Alice who had a doubtful expression on.

“It’s fine, she’s on our side. She’s the one who helped out Eugeo and me and guided us here. She loves and grieves for this world from the bottom of her heart.”

At the very least, that was a definite truth. Alice seemed to be unable to cast aside all doubt and hesitation, but she still gently pushed her left hand against the right of her chest—the place healed by Cardinal’s miraculous power—and nodded deeply.

"…Understood. High ranking sacred arts reflect the heart of its user… I shall believe in the warmth of this person's power that had healed my wound."

That's totally it; I nodded in return, deeply moved.

Even if it was the weakest healing art consisting of only one line, its effect would vary greatly depending on whether it was performed on someone carelessly or with sincere prayers.

Cardinal's healing art was filled with a true tenderness that melted away all suffering with its warmth. That was exactly why I still clung to hope and believed that her determination to return the entire Underworld to null was up to discussion—but that, too, could only happen if we won this fight.

What contrivances did the sword golem possess to instantly recover completely after losing all of its power and how should that be dealt with; we had to find the answers to those mysteries first.

With its entire body glinting with a gold tinged with black, the golem nonchalantly began its advance.

Cardinal braced her staff, prepared to confront it, but she couldn't quite use powerful sacred arts for a preemptive strike like several minutes ago. Administrator must be aiming for an opportunity to attack: the moment Cardinal uses any art.

—Think. That was all I could do now.

The sword golem's auto-healing ability was probably granted by the recollection release art. In that case, the «something» that the thirty swords forming the golem's huge body originated from should possess some property that allowed that.

What first came to mind upon hearing about the automatic regeneration of Life was the giant tree that was the source of the black sword held in my right hand, the Gigas Cedar, but that amazing recovery ability was only due to the abundant space resources supplied by the sunlight and the earth.

But the only source of resources in this hall was the moonlight pouring in from the southern windows. I highly doubted there was enough accumulated for that giant frame to instantly recover. In other words, the sword golem did not originate from an object of nature like the Gigas Cedar.

Thus, the remaining possibility was a living creature type of object that possessed a recovery ability unreliant on space resources? But Cardinal had definitely said that the enormous named monsters that once inhabited this world were extinct. Meanwhile, normal animal units like bears and cows did not have a priority level capable of that absurd offensive potential. Even if

ten thousands of them were concurrently transmuted into a sword, the result would probably be far from reaching the sacred tools of the integrity knights. That was just how low a beast's Life was. Priority and durability were proportional, so creating thirty of those incredible weapons would need thousands or tens of thousands of those large animal units—

Wait.

Didn't Administrator say something strange earlier?

Four to **three hundred**.

The *units* used to create that sword golem were not *moving objects* like animals. They were *human units*, the human beings living in this world. Not to mention—it took three hundred of them. A number that would require an entire small village to be wiped out to fulfill.

I was convinced I reached the correct conclusion after a moment of thought so fast that it felt as though my mind was on fire. But that granted no reprieve. Instead, what assailed me was an overwhelming terror. Goose bumps rapidly rose all over my skin, from head to toe.

The people of the Underworld were not simply objects capable of movement. They possessed fluct lights, souls, like us, people from the real world. And even when transmuted into swords, their fluct light would not cease activity as they still existed in a corporeal form.

In other words, those turned into parts for that golem might still retain their consciousness within that metal, even if they had no eyes, ears, or mouths.

Apparently having arrived at the same conclusion before myself, Cardinal's petite frame faintly trembled. Her small hand turned pure white with how tightly it gripped the staff it held up.

"……You abomination."

The words she let out were fragmented with such fury that it overshadowed her cherubic voice.

"You… how… how inhumane could you be?! You are their ruler! Were those that you turned into that sword puppet not the people you should have been protecting originally?!!"

Two moans came from my left in that instant.

"People…? People, you mean, human… beings?"

Eugeo took a giddy step back as he murmured.

"People, you say… that monstrosity…?"

Alice placed her left hand against her chest again as she groaned as well.

A cold, tense silence engulfed the hall.

Before long, Administrator replied with a smile as though she had appreciated the taste of our fright, dread, and anger.

“That’s, right. So you fi—nally realize. At the rate we were going, I was afraid everyone would die off before I revealed it.”

With an innocent, cherry voice as though she was glad from the bottom of her heart, the absolute ruler clapped her hands together and continued with a “But still”.

“I’m a little disappointed in you, shorty. Despite peeking at me for these two hundred years from that cellar, you have still yet to understand me, haven’t you? And I’m supposed to be your mother in a sense.”

“…Nonsense! I am more than well aware of that depraved personality of yours!”

“Then what was with those worthless words? Like, the people I should have been protecting and such. Why would I be bothered by such trivial matters?”

Her smile stayed as it always had been, but the air around Administrator seemed to be rapidly approaching freezing point. Words flowed like grains of ice from her lips that showed a smile at absolute zero.

“I am the ruler. I need nothing more than for those under my rule to continue their existence in this world according to my will. Be them humans or swords, that is of no great concern.”

“You… monster…”

Cardinal’s voice dried up and stopped.

I couldn’t find the words to speak either.

The mental state of this female, no, existence named Administrator had already exceeded the scope of my understanding. True to her name, she was the system’s administrator and recognized the masses of the Human World as no more than data files to be overwritten. An analogy would be like internet addicts of the real world who continued to download enormous files merely for the sake of collecting and arranging them, maybe? With barely any concern for what was in those files.

During the conversation in the Great Library Room, Cardinal had said that the behavioral principle burnt into Administrator's soul was the «preservation of the world». That was probably correct, but its reality was far more complex.

Did the first generation Cardinal System, that soulless management program, from the old world of SAO truly acknowledge us players as humans… as intelligent living beings?

The answer was a no.

We were no more than data to be managed, sorted, and deleted.

The girl, Quinella, from an age long ago might have not committed murder.

However, human beings were no longer human to the current Administrator.

"My, what is the matter, losing your voices all together?"

Looking down at us from high above, the administrator adorably tilted her head.

"You couldn't possibly be that shocked by the transmutation of merely three hundred *units*, could you?"

"Merely… you say?"

The highest minister replied with a composed nod to Cardinal's nearly inaudible question.

"Merely, only, just nothing more than that, shorty. How many fluct lights did you think collapsed before this doll was completed? In the first place, this is simply a *prototype*, you know? Mass producing enough of the perfected version to deal with that detestable load experiment would take roughly half of them, I suppose."

"Half… you…"

"Half's half. Half of the approximately eighty thousands *human units* in the Human World… forty thousand *units*. I guess that much should do fine. To fight off the invasion from the Dark Territory and invade that side, that is."

After voicing out such horrifying words without the slightest excitement, Administrator turned her silver eyes towards the knight standing on my left.

"Now, are you satisfied, Alice-chan? Your precious Human World will certainly be safe, won't it?"

Alice did nothing more than listen to her teasing giggles in silence.

I noticed her hand quivering slightly as it held the Fragrant Olive Sword's grip, but I had no idea at that time whether that was due to fear or anger.

Soon, what came from her was a single question with as much restraint as she could muster.

"…Esteemed Highest Minister. The words of human no longer reach you. Hence, I shall enquire as a practitioner of sacred arts. The thirty swords forming that doll… who exactly are their owners?"

I hesitated for a moment. The one who performed the release of recollections on those thirty swords and assembled them into the golem was Administrator herself. Hence, I had always thought the highest minister would be the owner though that went against that basic rule.

But Alice's next words negated my conjecture.

"Esteemed Highest Minister, you cannot possibly be their owner. Even if you can contravene the rule of having only one sword to fully control, you cannot contravene the next rule. Releasing their recollections require the sword and its owner to be linked by steadfast bonds. As shown by my Fragrant Olive Sword and myself, the other knights and their sacred tools, or even Kirito and Eugeo and their swords. The owner has to love the sword and be loved in return. Esteemed Minister, if the origins of those swords that give that doll its form are the innocent masses as you say—you cannot possibly be loved by those swords!!"

Alice declared with a dignified reverberation.

What broke that silence was Administrator's suppressed laughter, inscrutable to the very end.

"Ufufufu… I wonder what fuels the vibrancy such souls, young and foolish, have. What bittersweet *sentimentalism* like a freshly-picked apple… You're giving me the urge to crush that this very moment, to drink up every last drop of its juice."

Her specular eyes wore a rainbow glint as though reflecting the excitement in her chest.

"But it is too early. It is not time yet. Alice-chan, what you mean to say, is that I am incapable of exhibiting the *imagination* needed to *overwrite* these swords, isn't it? You are correct. My memory domain no longer holds the allowance to record this many swords in high fidelity."

On the other end of where the highest minister gracefully pointed was the sword golem constructed from thirty swords, still advancing bit by bit.

As far as I understood, the armament full control art required the owner to memorize the weapon's information, such as its appearance, texture, and weight, and combined that with assistance from the command, to produce that technique capable of transforming the weapon with the power of one's imagination.

In other words, the necessary condition to activate the art would be for the owner to store all information of that sword into his or her own memory.

For example, if I wanted to use my black sword's armament full control art, there must be not even the slightest, miniscule difference between A, the information of the sword in the shared memory storage in the middle of the Light Cube Cluster, the Main Visualizer, and B, the information of the sword in my fluct light. That would then lead to me transforming B with my imagination and overwriting A with that, which meant that transformation would be shared with everyone else. This logic was likely similar to the «transformation phenomenon» that happened to my body earlier.

On the other hand, Administrator's light cube's capacity should be packed full with memories from her life over three hundred years. Remembering the information of thirty swords in exact detail hardly seemed possible for her. Alice had probably pointed it out from her personal beliefs, but still, it was an accurate gauge of the system.

Thus— The swords constructing that golem should have their own unique owners. Each with a soul holding onto a sword's memory within their light cube and in possession of such wicked, destructive desires.

But where? This space was now isolated from the outside world in all sense and meaning. Hence, unless the owners were in this hall as well, the logic wouldn't work out…

"The answer is before your eyes."

Administrator suddenly looked straight at me and said so.

Continuing on, she turned her sight towards the left.

"Eugeo should have understood already."

"……!?"

Breathless, I looked towards Eugeo who stood on the opposite side of Alice.

My flaxen-haired partner was staring at the highest minister without the slightest movement as his blood left his face.

His brown pupils were expressionless to a frightening extent as they trembled slightly and turned right up towards the ceiling.

Following his lead, I looked up as well. A miniature with the creation myth as its theme was depicted on the slightly domed canopy and the crystals set in various spots flickered gently.

I had thought of both the art and the crystals on the ceiling as nothing more than ornaments thus far. But Eugeo's face was blank aside from his two eyes that shone with a bizarre light as they stared a hole into the ceiling.

Before long, my partner forced out a parched voice through his lips.

"I see… so it was like that?"

"Eugeo… you found out something!?"

Eugeo slowly turned to me when I asked and muttered with a look filled with profound fear.

"Kirito… Those crystals set in that ceiling. Those are… not merely decorations. Those are definitely… the «memory fragments» stolen from the integrity knights."

"Wha…"

Cardinal and Alice, too, let out astonished voices while I was at a loss for words.

The integrity knights' memory fragments.

That referred to the most precious memories extracted from the humans turned into knights through the «Synthesis Ritual». Those memories were surely of their most beloved ones in most cases. For Eldrie, his mother. For Deusolbert, his wife.

If that was true—those crystals were the owners of the swords that formed that sword golem?

No. The crystals should be no more than fragmented information saved in fluct light. They were no replacement for complete souls capable of independent thought. I could hardly imagine them being able to link with the swords and activate the full control art.

No— There was something prickling at my thoughts.

If those crystals were memory fragments from all of the integrity knights, then they should include Knight Alice's memories which were stolen through that synthesis six years ago.

And this was the Central Cathedral's highest floor.

Two years ago, Eugeo suffered a severe wound after getting in a fight with a squad of goblins in the cave north of Rulid. I had certainly heard that mysterious voice while tending to that wound.

The voice, resembling that of a young girl, had told me she was waiting for Eugeo and me at the highest floor of the cathedral. And with that, sacred energy flooded into us and healed Eugeo.

What if that voice belonged to Alice's memory fragment? In other words, wouldn't that mean the memories stolen from knights possessed independent thought?

However, there was still the rule of being in contact with the target for all sacred arts. Not even Administrator could send her voice and healing power from this Central Cathedral to Rulid, a distant seven hundred and fifty kilometers away.

Such a miracle could only be brought about by the same «phenomenon overwriting» principle as the armament full control art. Hence, the memories saved in Alice's memory fragment were effective—effectively…

Cardinal's shout, raging like flames, interrupted my rapidly whirling thoughts.

"I see… so that was it! Damn you, Quinella… how far do you intend to toy with mankind, you monster?!!"

I came back to my senses and saw the silver-haired ruler smiling calmly before me.

"My, as expected of you… I suppose I should give you that much credit, shorty? It seems you discovered it earlier than I thought you would, you hypocritical advocate for benevolence. Now then, let me ask again, what is your answer?"

"The *pattern* shared by all fluct lights. Is that not so?!"

Cardinal swept the black staff in her right hand towards Administrator.

"By inserting the *piece* of memory extracted via the Synthesis Ritual into a mental model *loaded* in a new light cube, it could be treated as an imitation human *unit*. Still, its intelligence would be exceedingly limited… the existence would possess nearly nothing more than its instincts, so it is inconceivable that it could execute a *command* as advanced as the armament full control art."

I desperately tried to understand the meaning behind her perplexing words.

Cardinal should have said this in the Great Library Room. That the babies in this world were born by assembling together a fluct light prototype, loaded in a new light cube, with a part of the parents' external characteristics, thought patterns, and tendencies. It should be fundamentally the same as that. With the memory fragment from the knight embedded instead of the information inherited from the two parents.

In other words, the crystals gleaming at the ceiling were babies given the memories of who they most loved… was that it? But if it was, how could «Alice» talk to me two years ago? A newborn could hardly speak in such a manner.

New words from Cardinal reached my ears while I was tossed about by my endless doubts.

"…However, that limit, too, has a loophole. That would be when the piece of memory inserted into the fluct light prototype and the linked weapon's structural information possess a pattern common to both with negligible differences. To be specific…"

The sage's words paused once there before she loudly knocked the staff's base against the floor and shouted.

"—Those recorded on the memories stolen from the integrity knights, those that they loved most, were used as resources to create the swords. Is that not it, Administrator?!!"

An overwhelming sense of dread and disgust froze my entire being the instant my short-lived confusion was dissolved.

The owners of the swords were the integrity knights' stolen memories of their loved ones.

And the swords were created with those loved ones used as the raw materials… Eldrie's mother, Deusolbert's wife, and in all likelihood, those closely related to them as well.

That was what Cardinal meant.

Eugeo and Alice likely understood that a moment slower as alarmed lamentations simultaneously escaped from them.

Certainly, if that was true, the recollection release phenomenon might be logically possible. After all, A and B, the information in the Main Visualizer and the fluct light, would have been derived from the same existence. If the newly-born fluct light given the memory fragment held some sort of strong emotion for the linked sword, that phenomenon could potentially occur.

The problem was what sort was that «some sort». What sort of urge or emotion from the memory fragments, which should have no more than a newborn's level of intelligence, fueled the gigantic sword golem…?

"Greed."

As though she had seen through my doubt, Administrator spoke that word without delay.

"The desire to touch. To embrace. To make another its own. That unsightly greed moves this sword doll."

Fufu. Ufufu. Her silver eyes narrowed and the girl softly sniggered.

“The artificial individuals with the knights’ memory *fragments* inserted desire only one thing—to make that one person they remember their own, that’s all. They sense the presence of that person close by while they lay stuck on that ceiling. But they can’t touch them. They can’t make contact. All they see in their maddening hunger and thirst are enemies who stand in their path. If they hack through those enemies, the one they desire will be theirs. Hence, they fight. No matter what wounds they suffer, no matter how many times they fall, they rise up and fight for all eternity. …How is it? Wouldn’t you say it’s a lovely design? Marvelous… the power of greed is truly marvelous!”

Administrator’s shrill voice reverberated as the two eyes on the sword golem nearby flickered violently.

Metallic, brutal resonance emitted from its entire frame—to me, that sounded like screams of sorrow and despair.

That giant was no automatic weaponry that desired carnage.

To once again meet with the one it remembers; such thoughts congregated in this miserable, lost child and moved it.

Administrator expressed what fueled it as greed. However, that was—

“……Wrong!!”

The shout that coincided with my thoughts came from Cardinal.

“Wanting to meet with another once again, to touch them with their own hands, such desires are only defiled with that word! That—that is genuine love!! The greatest power humans possess and their final miracle… that is no toy for you to trifle with!!”

“They are the same, you foolish shorty.”

Administrator extended her two palms towards the sword golem as her lips warped with joy.

“Love is to dominate… love is greed! And its actual form is no more than an output of signals from a fluct light! I am simply making good use of the signals with the strongest intensity. In a format far, far *smarter* than the means you employ!!”

The ruler’s voice rang high as though convinced of her triumph.

“What you have done amounts to nothing more than cajoling two or three powerless children. But I am different. The doll I created overflows with the *energy* of greed from over three hundred *units* after including those in the memory *fragments*! And most importantly…”

The words let loose after that flash of silence brought to mind a lethal sting.

"…Now that you are aware of that, you can never destroy this doll. After all, though their forms may have changed, these manipulated swords are still living human beings!!"

Administrator's proclamation echoed for a long while before a gradual demise.

I stared in stupefaction as Cardinal's staff, raised towards the sword golem, gently fell.

The voice that came from Cardinal next was abnormally mellow.

"Aah… that is certainly true. I cannot murder. That is the one constraint I definitely cannot break. …I had spent two hundred years to refine my arts in order to kill you and your body which deviated from humanity… but it appears that had been in vain."

I listened, dazed, to those words that admitted her defeat in a manner that was far too benign.

But if the swords of the sword golem were really humans, Cardinal could not put an end to those lives… no, she would not. Even if there was a method to bypass the restriction on her actions like for the case of the tea cup and soup cup.

Kuku. Kukukuku.

Administrator's lips swung as high up as they could and torn into the strained atmosphere with a throaty sound, like she was suppressing raucous laughter.

"How foolish… how comical…"

Ku-ku-ku-ku.

"You should already know well enough. The true form of this world. What constitutes as the lives in that thing are no more than an amalgamation of *data* to be overwritten. And yet you still recognize that *data* as human beings and continue to be bound by that restriction on murder… there should be a limit to foolishness…"

"Nay, they are human, Quinella."

Cardinal rebutted in what seemed like an admonishing tone.

"Each and every person living in the Underworld possesses true emotions, those that we have lost. A heart to laugh, to grieve, to rejoice, to love. What else is needed for a human to be human? Whether the vessel for their soul is a light cube or an organic brain, that poses no actual problem. I believe so. Hence—I shall accept it with pride, my defeat, that is."

The last few words she murmured dug deep into the core of my chest. But what inflicted a sharp pain that truly hurt were the words that followed those.

"However, on one condition. You may have my life… and on account of that, spare those of these younglings."

"……!!"

I tried to take a step forward, my breath gone. Eugeo and Alice both went tense as well.

But the aura of her firm resolve exuding from Cardinal's small back brought our movement to a halt.

Administrator's eyes narrowed like a cat with its prey hanging off its nails and tilted her head slightly.

"Oh my… what *merit* would accepting such a condition bring me with the circumstances as they are?"

“I said it earlier, did I not, that I had devoted myself to refining my arts. If you wish for a battle, I will whittle off half of your Life even while sealing that pitiable doll’s movements. Wouldn’t that excess burden expose your already unreliable memory capacity to even greater danger?”

“N-Nn…”

Putting on a smile to the very end, Administrator placed the index finger on her right hand against her chin and acted as though she was mulling over it.

“I doubt a battle with a pre-determined victor would be much of a threat, but well, it would be a bother. …Send them out from this closed-off space to somewhere in this world would be enough to «let them go», wouldn’t it? I shall have to decline if that includes not laying my hands on them ever again.”

“Nay, it would be enough to have them withdraw this one time. They would definitely…”

Cardinal left the rest unspoken. Instead, the hem of her robe fluttered as she turned to us and looked upon us with a gentle light filling her eyes.

I wanted to shout for her to stop with her jokes. My provisional life couldn’t possibly match Cardinal’s real one in value. I seriously considered if I should slash at Administrator this very instant and buy time for Cardinal to flee.

But I couldn’t. That would end up waging Eugeo and Alice’s lives as well in that high-risk gamble.

My right hand gripped my sword’s handle so tightly that it hurt and my right foot stepped on the floor so hard that it creaked. Administrator’s voice reached my ears while the struggle between impulse and reason continued in me.

“Oh, very well.”

Showing a cherubic grin, the smiling girl magnanimously nodded.

“I’m all for leaving the fun bits for later too, you know? …I shall swear it on the goddess, Stacia, then. I will…”

“No, swear it not on the goddess, but on that which is most precious to you… your own fluct light.

Cardinal interrupted curtly and Administrator conceded once more, with her smile turning slightly more cynical.

“Oh, sure, well, I shall swear it on my fluct light and the precious *data* accumulated in it. After killing you, shorty, I will let the three behind you go unhurt. I won’t be able to break this vow… for the time being, at least.”

“Very well.”

Having agreed, Cardinal turned her sight to Eugeo and Alice, who stood still, for several seconds each, then finally looked at me once again. A gentle smile rested on her youthful face and her dark brown eyes reflected nothing but light filled with tenderness; emotions overflowed from my heart and fell as liquid, blurring my vision without any means to hold them back.

Cardinal’s lips moved and whispered, mute, “Sorry”.

On the far end, Administrator announced, clear and acute, “Farewell, shorty”.

With a light wave of the highest minister’s right hand, the sword golem that had reached the heart of the room came to a neat stop.

Leaving her hand raised high, she closed her palm as though gripping something and light particles practically seeped out from thin air, fluttering and gathering into a narrow, long form.

The object that appeared was a silver rapier. It was the same color as a mirror: the blade, narrow like a needle, the elegant guard, and everything else. Its form was slender like an ornament, but merely looking at the overwhelming priority it exuded as an aura choked my breathing even from this distance.

Administrator’s personal sacred instrument, on par with Cardinal’s black staff—it must be the greatest source of the resources needed to support her arts.

The silver rapier rang like a chime as it moved and pointed straight at Cardinal.

Looking forward, the sage began walking with firm steps without showing the slightest sign of fear towards the sacred sword.

Alice and Eugeo leaned forward as though they wanted to chase after her. But I brought up my left hand and held them back.

I honestly wanted to raise my sword and slash at Administrator. But lunging forth on impulse would serve only to waste Cardinal’s determination and dedication. Thus, I did no more than to continue holding back my tears, gritting my teeth, and standing at that point.

A rainbow of ecstatic elation swirled in Administrator’s eyes as she looked down upon her other self.

Immediately after, an immense flash of lightning emitted from the end of the keen blade, dyeing the entire hall white, and pierced through Cardinal's petite frame.

In the middle of my sight that blurred as it underwent halation, a small silhouette bent backwards harshly as though it got flicked away.

The energy from the gigantic lightning attack scorched even the air as they dispersed and I fought against the pressure, desperately keeping my eyes open even as I stepped back.

The young sage still stood. Even as her body leaned against the long staff, her two feet stepped firmly onto the floor and her face looked up at her bitter enemy with resolve.

But the traces of damage were painful to look at. The jet-black hat and robes were burnt in spots, with smoke rising from those, and a part of her curly brown hair was now charred black from its previous glossy condition.

A mere five meters before us, who stood still in silence, Cardinal slowly brought her left hand up and casually brushed her burnt hair. Though hoarse, her voice still firmly filled the air.

"Wh… ew, is that all… your arts can do? No matter, how many… of those, you shoot…"

Gagaaan!!

The world shook once more with that blaring roar.

A lightning attack greater than before broke out from Administrator's rapier and mercilessly stabbed into Cardinal's body.

Her rectangular hat blew off and was annihilated as it scattered into tiny pieces. Her small body convulsed pitifully and swayed towards the right, but managed to place her knee on the floor right as she was about to fall on her side.

"I was holding back of course, shorty."

Administrator's whisper rattled the scorched air as though she had somehow restrained her overflowing, wild joy.

"It would be so dull if it ended in an instant. I mean, I did wait two hundred years for this moment… didn't I!!"

Gagaa!!

A third lightning attack.

It drew an arc and struck Cardinal from above like a whip and she was thrown down upon the floor with tremendous force. The silhouette that bounced up high crashed down once more with a dry noise and laid sideways, powerless.

Most of her velvet robe had been burnt away with numerous burn holes opened up in the white blouse and black knickers she worn inside. Burns crawled over the snow-like skin on her hands and feet like black snakes.

She pushed the end of those arms against the floor and tried to lift her body slightly.

As though ridiculing her desperate attempt to muster her strength, a new flash of lightning swiped in from the side. The adolescent figure was helplessly blown away and tumbled across the floor for several meters.

“Fu… ufufu. Fufufufu.”

In the air a distance away, Administrator apparently failed to suppress her laughter any longer.

“Fufu, aha. Ahahaha.”

The boundary between the iris and white of those specular eyes faded as a dazzling prism radiance swirled within them.

“Ahahaha! Hahahahahaha!!”

From the tip of that rapier she held up during that shrill laughter—

Shot out countless bolts of lightning in rapid succession, stubbornly stabbing in the already unmoving Cardinal. Each time her small frame bounced like a ball, everything burnt away: her clothes, her skin, her hair, every bit of her existence.

“Hahahahaha!! Ahahahahahahaha!!”

The burst of laughter from Administrator barely entered my ears; her body twisted in demonic joy and her silver hair became disheveled.

The uncontainable tears flowing from my eyes and contorting my vision blurry were definitely not due to the incessant flashes burning my eyes. The emotions raging in my chest had no other means of exit.

Lamentation at the loss of Cardinal’s life before my eyes; fury at Administrator for enjoying this merciless execution; and most importantly, anger at my powerless self for watching on without doing a thing.

I could neither raise my sword nor take any steps forward. Even it would incur the worst outcome—with Cardinal's self-sacrifice going to waste—a voice incessantly told me to slash at Administrator with the sword in my right hand, but my body remained still as though it was petrified.

And I even knew the reason for that.

If the power of incarnation was what allowed me to break the limits with that long range Vorpal Strike that pierced Chief Elder Chudelkin, then that, too, was what turned me into a wooden doll now.

Minutes ago, I suffered a severe wound without even managing to land a hit on the sword golem with my sword when I tried. The cold sensation of the blade tearing deep into my torso had branded a strong image of defeat onto me. Fear coiled about my limbs and denied me from recalling once again the image of «The Black Swordsman» in this place.

I had no chance of victory in my current state against any integrity knight, no, even against any trainee from the Sword Mastery Academy. Let alone slashing the highest minister; there was no way I could accomplish that.

"…Kuh… ugh……"

A pathetic whimper escaped from my quivering throat and reached my own ears.

Cardinal understood she had lost and accepted it, but still gallantly continued to stand; intense self-loathing filled me for accepting the loss of her life with resignation, without any attempt to save her despite it happening before my eyes.

Alice gritted her teeth on my left and Eugeo's body trembled slightly as tears quietly flowed when I thought to check. I knew not what they felt in their hearts, but at the very least, it was evident that they were also bearing with their own lack of power.

Even if we could escape from here, just what could we accomplish with this scar carved into our hearts—?

Administrator held the rapier with the final and likely strongest bolt of lightning coursing through its blade aloft, high up, as we looked on, paralyzed.

"Now… I suppose it's about time to put an end to this. To our game of hide-and-seek of two hundred years. Farewell, Lyceris. Farewell, my daughter… and my other self."

With words that rang of sentimentalism exiting those lips curled with ecstasy, the highest minister swung the rapier down.

The final attack, emitted as thousands of streaks of lightning, shot at Cardinal's body, lying on the floor, incinerating and destroying it.

The sage drifted high into the air and fell at my feet, all while her charred right leg turned into countless fragments starting from her knee. A dry noise rang out with barely any weight behind it. Black soot scattered from all over her body and dissolved in the air.

"Ufufu… ahaha… ahahahahaha! Aah-hahahahahaha!!"

Loud laughter once again poured from Administrator while she spun the sword in her right hand and twisted her body as though she was dancing.

"I see it… I see it, I see your Life flowing away, little by little!! Aah, how beautiful… each and every one of those drops dripping down looks like the finest jewels… Now, let us witness the final act. I will even allow you the time for some parting words."

My knees crumbled and I reached my hands out towards Cardinal's body as though obediently following those words.

The girl's face was charred black on the right and her left eyelid was shut. However, a hint of the warmth of life, on the verge of vanishing, made itself known to my fingertips as they touched her cheek.

My two hands unconsciously carried Cardinal up and held her to my chest. My unstoppable tears trickled down onto the horrible burns, one after another.

Her eyelashes that had escaped from being burnt quivered slightly and rose. Even on the verge of death, a light of boundless compassion still filled Cardinal's dark brown pupils.

[Don't cry, Kirito.]

Those words echoed in my consciousness through thoughts rather than sound.

[This isn't all that bad an end. I would have never believed... that I could die in this manner... in the arms of someone my heart could connect to...]

"I'm sorry… I'm so sorry…"

The words spilling from my lips hardly did any more than to stir the air. Hearing that, Cardinal showed a faint smile with her miraculously unhurt lips.

[What need... do you have... to apologize. You still... have a mission... don't you. You, with Eugeo, and... Alice too... the three of you... for this, beautiful, world... please...]

Cardinal's voice rapidly faded away as her body became increasingly light yet again.

Alice who knelt by my side suddenly reached out with both hands and wrapped them around Cardinal's right hand.

"We will… we will."

Both her voice and her cheeks were utterly drenched with flowing tears.

"This life you had bestowed upon me… you may rest assured, it shall definitely serve your will."

This time, Eugeo's hands reached out from the other side.

"…Me too."

The voice from Eugeo was filled with firm determination for the usual reserved and gentle partner I knew him as.

"I, too, have finally understood what I was needed for to achieve."

But—

Neither Alice nor I expected the words that followed; Cardinal was likely the same.

"And it's the time now, too. I will not run. I… have a duty I must fulfill at all cost."

4

—Powerless.

—Why do I lack power so?

Eugeo was immersed in those thoughts alone while the highest minister, Administrator, burnt the sage, Cardinal, with monstrous bolts of lightning.

The sword golem he thought as some grand demon from the land of darkness was originally human like Eugeo… certainly, he was aghast upon hearing that and shuddered at the terror that was the highest minister for thinking up of and carrying out that task. However, what struck Eugeo the most was the despair from his complete inability.

There was a reason why they, Kirito, Knight Alice, the black spider, Charlotte, the highest minister, Cardinal, and himself had ended up in a fight against the highest minister on the highest floor of this cathedral. That would be Eugeo's wish to rescue his childhood friend, Alice

Schuberg, from the Axiom Church. Eugeo was the one who pulled the rest into this danger. That was why he must be the one to fight on the front lines the most, the one to be hurt the most.

—And yet, I.

Ended up succumbing to Administrator's temptations, pointing a sword towards Kirito as an integrity knight, memories sealed away. Returned to the highest floor after trapping Kirito and Alice in ice with the intention to take down the highest minister without anyone else's help, which went up in smoke instead. Blinded Chief Elder Chudelkin with an art during that fight yet ended up doing no more than watch as the sword golem cut down Charlotte, Kirito, and Alice.

—Was I this powerless?

—Alice's memory fragment was only a mere ten mel away… somewhere in the miniature covering the canopy. Would I have my life saved by Cardinal's self-sacrifice and be chased out from the cathedral without taking that back? Would that be how my journey ends?

The highest minister would definitely expel Eugeo, Kirito, and Alice to multiple far apart locations. They might even be blown away outside of the Norlangarth North Empire. In the worst case, he might neither meet Kirito nor return to Rulid ever again. He might end up alone in an unfamiliar, foreign land, with the fear of pursuers from the Axiom Church… regretting his own foolishness and powerlessness…

At the very least, he should keep his eyes from closing; that thought first went through his mind as he solemnly glared at the dazzling lightning hammering Cardinal.

Eugeo then noticed at last. That resigning himself to the fate of being sent away to a foreign land… would be the most disgraceful choice he could make.

The highest minister had said so. That she would transform forty thousand humans, half of those inhabiting the Human World, into swords. That she would produce that terrifying yet miserable monster in huge numbers and fight the forces from the land of darkness.

That meant all families and loved ones would be pulled apart from each other. Like Eldrie and his mother. Like Deusolbert and his partner. Like Alice and the Schubergs.

And they would all turn into hideous, horrifying weaponry.

Such injustice was unforgivable, utterly forgivable.

—Stopping that tragedy would be the final mission handed to me. I am here, now, for that reason. I have neither the swordsmanship of Kirito or Alice, nor the arts proficiency of Cardinal… however, there was definitely still something I could do. If I had the time to lament about my lack of power, I should be using that time to search for a way to fight.

Eugeo desperately pondered as he stood still.

Though the Blue Rose Sword could possibly break the barrier that deterred all metal as it was half ice, a reckless charge to slash at the highest minister would only result in burning to death by lightning or cut apart by the sword golem. The recollection release art would only stop the highest minister's movement for a moment at best.

Even with an attempt to destroy the sword golem first, the attacks would not reach its only weakness, the piety module in its chest. Even if they did, it would need an accurate strike through the one cen gap between the three greatswords forming its back. Not to mention the need to slip through the attack from its ribcage's blades. That would require the ability to soar through the air like the highest minister and armor capable of repelling sharp blades.

It might be better to just turn into hard ice and fuse with the sword like what happened in that glimpse, at the Great Library Room, of the blue rose and eternal ice's memories.

In that instant.

Eugeo's two eyes opened wide.

There was a method to grant that wish. There should be.

However, even if it was realized, there was something else necessary. The same power that fueled the sword golem. The miraculous power that could bring forth the recollection release art.

Then suddenly, Eugeo heard his name called out—or so he thought.

As though something drawn him there, he looked up at the hall's canopy.

Art depicting the creation myth era was drawn upon all of the extensive canopy aside from the part in its middle.

The goddesses who created the skies and lands of the Human World. The ancient humans granted the opportunity to live there. Eventually, the goddesses chose a medium to guide the humans in their place. And the Axiom Church was born, with a tower of white marble built in the heart of the central capital, Centoria.

Just like the description of the creation myth Eugeo was immersed in reading at a nook of the Great Library Room. However, those were likely all fabricated. A story made up by the highest minister, Administrator, to control the masses.

The miniature of a small bird resided on a corner of the canopy filled with such lies. It was flying earnestly with an ear of wheat in its beak. A piece of art of a small bird blue that died as it

brought wheat to the remote regions from the fields around the capital strictly controlled by the upper nobility. It was the one and only story that he still believed might have been the truth.

The crystal set in that small bird's eye flickered blue.

A radiance always by Eugeo's side since long ago. A light that twinkled vividly in the eyes of a girl with blonde hair of the same age—

And thus, Eugeo finally understood the mission entrusted to him.

5

Eugeo… just what do you have in mind?

I shifted my vision with that thought.

The flaxen-haired young man, my sole closest friend, Eugeo the Aincrad-style swordsman, met my eyes for a moment and nodded with a smile. He immediately returned his eyes towards Cardinal and voiced out those words.

"Cardinal-san. With what power you have left, please turn me—this body of mine—into a sword. Just like that doll."

Perhaps those words tugged her consciousness back—

Cardinal's eyes, that had almost lost all light, opened weakly.

[Eugeo... you...]

"If we run from here now… Administrator will turn half of the humans in the world into that horrifying monster. We definitely can't allow that. Any last hope we have in preventing that tragedy should lie within this art…"

Showing a clear smile as though he understood everywhere, Eugeo wrapped Cardinal's left hand with both of his and recited in a whisper.

"*System call. …Remove core protection.*"

I had never heard of such an art.

Eugeo's eyelids gently shut after he recited those words.

Complex patterns resembling electric circuits were drawn upon his smooth forehead in lines of violet light. They extended from his cheeks to his neck as I looked on, then reached his shoulders, his arms, and his fingertips.

The shining circuits even encroached a little onto Cardinal's left hand, gripped by Eugeo's two hands, and sparkled at its end as its arrival was expected.

Remove core protection.

Judging from the meaning of the phrase, Eugeo must have granted Cardinal unrestrained modification authority to his own fluct light. I didn't understand why he knew of such an art, but at the very least, those three words were filled to the brim with Eugeo's strong determination and resolve.

The sage who received that command on the verge of death opened both her unhurt left eye and burnt right eye as her lips trembled. Her shuddering thoughts made themselves known through our touching skin.

[Are you certain... Eugeo? There is no guarantee... you can return... to how you were.]

With circuits of light surfaced on his brow and cheeks, Eugeo nodded deeply with both eyes still shut.

"It's fine. This is my duty…the reason why I am here now. That's right, there was one thing that I have to say first. Cardinal-san… and the both of you too, Kirito, Alice. Metallic weapons will not reach the highest minister. That's why I couldn't stab her with that dagger you gave me."

"……!"

Alice and I drew sharp breaths at Eugeo's whispers.

But Cardinal simply blinked and nodded without showing any surprise—or perhaps she lacked even the energy needed for that. With another slight shake of his head, Eugeo continued his words.

"Well then… please. Before Administrator notices."

"……No, stop it, Eugeo."

I moved my parched mouth and somehow forced those words out.

"I mean, if you don't return back to normal… you… your dream……"

If we managed to win this battle and Eugeo could not return to a human form. The wish he held in his chest for eight years… his hope to take Alice back and return to Rulid Village with her would remain unfulfilled.

Only two in this world could use that ridiculously advanced sacred art capable of transmuting human flesh and blood into weapons: Administrator and Cardinal. One was our ultimate enemy and the other's life was fading away. In other words, even if we could overturn this predicament, there might be no arts practitioner capable of turning him back to human.

Shrouded in violet light, Eugeo turned his eyes towards the ceiling before giving me a firm nod as I tried to continue speaking.

"It's fine, Kirito. I have to do this."

"……!"

I had no words to rebut my bosom friend's strong determination.

Really now, what could I say?

As one shaken to the core, capable of neither swinging a sword nor stepping forward, after merely a single defeat.

I gave an imploring look towards Alice at my side.

Distress and respect filled the knight's blue eyes in equal parts. Alice lowered her head deep down in the next instant. Towards the criminal she had struck with no visible emotion at the academy's large auditorium just two days ago.

Cardinal nodded slightly with her eyelids still raised within my arms, blood spreading from my lips as I silently chewed it.

[Very well, Eugeo. I shall offer my life's final art... to that determination of yours.]

Her voice regained its strength for a moment, like a candle nearly snuffed, and resounded in the core of my head.

A violet gleam resided in the middle of her opened brown eyes.

The light circuits connecting Eugeo to Cardinal through their hands glowed with intensity. That radiance raced up Eugeo's body in an instant and slipped out upon reaching the patterns on his forehead, forming a pillar of light that stretched up into the ceiling.

"What…?!"

The voice belonged to Administrator who appeared intoxicated on the other end. The ruler firmly shouted as the aftertaste of victory immediately vanished from her face and her silver eyes flared with anger.

“What do you think you are doing, after escaping from death?!!”

The rapier in her right hand turned to Eugeo and me, and as a result, Cardinal. Pure white sparks coiled about its blade.

“I will not let you!!”

Integrity Knight Alice shouted in return.

Jyaa; the blade of the Fragrant Olive Sword that should have been reaching its limit in terms of Life split apart loudly and whirled through the air as chains of gold. An ear-piercing boom roared out at nearly the same time, let loose a gigantic bolt of lightning.

The tip of the chains came into contact with the pure white lightning. The torrent of energy transmitted straight through the chains in that instant, drawing closer to Alice.

But by then, the golden chains had already stretched itself towards the back and stabbed the small edge at its end into the floor. Unable to flee from the improvised earth wire, all of the immense energy flowed into the tower’s structure and was extinguished, causing explosive roars and white smoke.

Alice pointed her left index finger at Administrator and declared.

“Lightning will not work on me!!”

“How cheeky… for a mere knight doll!!”

Spitting that out as her lips warped, the ruler showed that savage smile once again before raising her rapier of white silver up high.

“Then… how about this!?”

Bobobohh!! The air trembled and countless red points of light appeared about the blade. They obviously numbered beyond thirty. Supposing those were all thermal elements, it would then be a number easily exceeding the human limit of controlling twenty elements.

The fact that the Fragrant Olive Sword’s full control art was weak against intangible fire attacks was evident from the earlier battle against Chudelkin. But the golden knight showed no sign of backing off and even took a firm step forward with her right foot, a noise ringing out from the heel of her boots. As though understanding its master’s determination, the small blades that

made up the chain, too, split apart with a distinct metallic ring, arranging themselves into a grid pattern.

The violet light engulfing Eugeo grew endlessly in intensity even while the pair faced off.

Eugeo's body then lurched as it lost strength without warning. But instead of falling, the reverse happened with him gently floating into the air.

The clothes disappeared from Eugeo's body as though they had evaporated while he floated horizontally with his eyelids lowered.

The column of light rising from his brow had reached the ceiling. With that, a crystal set in the drawn miniature—one embedded in the eye of a small bird sailing through the ancient skies—gleamed brilliantly as though it was called out and responded in kind.

The approximately thirty crystals, memory fragments robbed from the integrity knights, set in the canopy should have all been activated as the «owners» of the sword golem. Despite that, the crystal in the small bird left the canopy as its radiance pulsed, descending through the light column.

That crystal—

That was possibly, no, unmistakably Knight Alice's memory fragment.

I had guessed those memories stolen from Alice through the Synthesis Ritual might have been related to her sister, Selka. But if that was true, Selka would have already been kidnapped from Rulid's church and turned into a sword in this room before two years ago.

If it wasn't Selka… just who was in the memories saved in that crystal?

Without giving me any answers to the doubts swirling inside me, the crystal in the form of a hexagonal prism, pointed at its two ends, quietly fell closer. The Blue Rose Sword lying on the floor rose as well and spun before stopping with its tip pointing at Eugeo's heart.

Eugeo's muscled body, the Blue Rose Sword's clear blade, and the translucent crystal prism aligned.

At the same time, Administrator swung down her rapier with a scream at the other end.

"Burn, all of you!!"

The thirty thermal elements drifting about the rapier coalesced and shot off as an enormous fire ball.

“I said… I will not let you!!”

Replying with a dignified shout, Alice turned her right hand towards the swirling flames.

The small cross-shaped blades aligned in the air immediately clumped together and formed a gigantic shield. Leaning her body into that shield, the knight kicked off the floor, and thrust into the conflagrant fire ball.

A clash.

Brief silence.

The following explosion shook the entirety of the isolated space. Rampaging heat and light filled the wide room alongside shock waves, with most of the carpet spread across the floor burnt to nothing. Even the giant form of the sword golem which had ceased movement a distance away violently shook while Administrator who was farther behind shielded her face with her left arm.

But I only had my breath taken away by the heat wave, thanks to the protection Alice’s shield granted. Both Cardinal, who I held in my arms, and the floating Eugeo appeared unaffected by the explosion.

The swirl of flames vanished from the hall in seconds like it had been all a lie—

Alice fell from the heart of the explosion with a thud. Shortly after, the Fragrant Olive Sword, back in its original form, stood straight by its master’s side as though it had lost its strength.

Smoke rose from the various places charred on Alice’s white and blue knight uniform. There were burns all over the skin on her limbs too, making it evident her Life had fallen greatly. It seemed the knight had lost consciousness as she stayed collapsed; the precious seconds she had earned were not in waste, however, Cardinal’s final art was mere moments from completion.

Enveloped by the column of violet light, Eugeo’s body lost its solidity and quietly turned transparent. The Blue Rose Sword at the center of his chest did likewise as it fused with him as though being drawn into him.

Yet another intense flash of light.

Eugeo’s body unraveled into countless ribbons of light above as I involuntarily squinted. Those gathered once more as they swirled about and mingled.

What hovered there was no longer a human body.

An enormous sword with a blade so utterly white it appeared blue and a crossed guard.

The length of the blade was as long and broad as Eugeo's body was. The beautiful lines that shaped it extended out from the base and converged on its keen tip. The floating crystal prism drew close to the small groove hollowed in the middle and joined with it after a soft click.

Cardinal's left arm lost its strength and plopped onto the floor.

The sage's lips quivered slightly and her final words flowed out as a gentle breeze.

[*Release... recollection.*]

Kiiiin!! The hexagonal prism that was pointed at its two ends—Alice's memory fragment—shone brilliantly with a distinct resonant sound. Eugeo's sword, too, chimed refreshingly as though in response while it soared ever higher.

The pure white greatsword was now independently operating on the exact same logic as the sword golem. Or in other words, through a sword forged from human flesh, a memory fragment as its owner, and the feelings joining the pair—the power of love.

But the sword golem had a component Eugeo's sword lacked.

The violet triangular prism Administrator buried in the golem's heart. A piety module. That was exactly what warped the power of love fueling the golem, urging it to slaughter.

"Curse you, Lyceris… to make me go so out of my way…!!"

Turning her face away with what appeared like disgust for the radiance exuded by the greatsword, Administrator shouted.

"You may try to imitate the art… but one flimsy sword could never hope to stand up to my weapon of destruction! I'll snap it in a single strike!!"

Administrator prompted with a wave of her left hand and the eyes of the sword golem that had stayed silent thus far gleamed bluish-white once more. Giiin; the gigantic form vigorously began its advance with an ear-piercing metallic screech.

Eugeo's sword spun its blade horizontally without any noise and pointed its tip straight towards the five mel tall giant.

Its white blade intensified in luminosity even further while scattered light particles whirled about it.

Immediately after, the greatsword took flight with a sound that brought to mind the tinkles of bells. Its pure white radiance drew a long streak in the air like a comet.

[...Beautiful...]

Cardinal let out faint thoughts from within my arms.

[Human... love. And the light, from their, will... How... beauti, ful...]

“Yes… it certainly is.”

Tears fell from my eyes once again as I murmured in reply.

[Kirito... I leave the, rest to you... Protect this... world and... its people... please...]

Moving her face with the remaining vestiges of her strength, Cardinal stared into me with her clear eyes and gave a gentle smile.

Upon confirming my wordless assent, the world’s greatest sage, this young girl, slowly shut her eyes and let out a weak breath—never to breathe ever again.

The meager weight my two arms felt swiftly faded while I held back my sobs.

In my vision, tinted iridescent, the pure white greatsword that had inherited Cardinal’s will flapped its wings of light as it soared straight.

Meeting its assault, the giant soldier spread its two greatsword hands and the smaller swords that served as its rib wide. The aura of darkness coiling about the countless blades which shone as they turned into jaws of evil.

Purely in terms of priority values, the greatsword formed solely from Eugeo’s body and the Blue Rose Sword couldn’t possibly match up to the golem converted from three hundred humans.

And yet, Eugeo’s sword accelerated even quicker, charging into the waiting swarm of blades.

It aimed towards the core of the golem’s torso—beyond even the spine formed from three swords at its center. A violet light spilling from the gaps between swords.

The piety module.

Gold and pure white collided a moment later. White and black light intertwined, swirled, and flared up.

A multitude of metallic noises, resembling the roars of beasts, were released as the blades forming the golem’s arms and ribcage crossed in an instant.

But right before that. The white sword plunged deep through the gap opened in the golem's spine.

The quiet breaking noise didn't escape my ears. The violet light spilling from its spine scattered into countless fragments.

An unclouded radiance enveloped the thirty enormous swords that were joined by a viscous darkness thus far, spreading from where the white greatsword pierced through.

It seemed like the love between Eugeo and Alice was practically easing the sorrow of the separated lovers.

Giiii! The discordant death throes were tuned into pellucid rhythmic tones in the blink of an eye, resounding beautifully as they dispersed.

A moment later. All of the swords that formed the weapon of destruction that drove us to the verge of death separated and flew off in all directions.

The swords, spinning as they fluttered up high, traced out thirty parabolae and simultaneously stabbed into the outer circumference of the hall with a deafening noise.

An enormous edge towered right behind me as well, like the mark for a grave. There was no mistake that was the golem's left leg that split my torso, but the dark aura that twined about it had already vanished and it was now no more than cold metal.

The crystals on the canopy that moved the golem, too, had their irregular flickering grow dim and eventually fell into silence. There was no understanding what had happened to «their» consciousness, but at the very least, Administrator's full control art that used them as an energy source was destroyed and a second cast of that seemed unlikely.

The white greatsword that dismantled the sword golem with a single strike still lay horizontal in the air, scattering particles of gleaming light.

Alice's memory fragment glittered at the core of the blade. The knowledge of what was saved within came to me like a sudden epiphany.

The integrity knights numbered thirty-one. The sword golem's swords numbered thirty. The one unused memory fragment belonged to Alice, that was evident from how it fused with Eugeo's sword.

Then why did Administrator not create a sword to pair up with Alice's memories?

Alice's memories… the love sealed within them must have definitely been too great. The young Alice loved Eugeo, Selka, her parents, every one of those living in the village, Rulid Village itself, along with the time she spent with those beloved to her and the time which had yet to come.

Not even the highest minister could transmute time and space. Hence, Administrator did not create a sword to be linked to Alice.

And that would be the true reason why the sword brought forth by Alice and Eugeo shone this beautifully.

"Aah… It's beautiful, indeed."

I hugged Cardinal's corpse tight and whispered to the girl's soul which had set out on a journey far beyond both the Underworld and the real world.

No voice responded, but I felt a faint luminance envelop the petite form in my two arms. Purity of the same variant as the miraculous light released by the white sword filled this radiance.

That was irrefutable evidence Cardinal, or the girl named Lyceris, was a human with true emotions and love, rather than some program like what she had made herself out to be time and time again.

Slight warmth accompanied the luminance, soaking into my chilled body while the presence of her corpse rapidly faded. Dimming into translucency, it gently unraveled and vanished as pure white resplendence.

Illuminating all of the isolated space, the waves of light that seemed to purify—

Were sliced apart by the edge of a voice that seemed hell-bent on opposing them to the very end.

"Such dull, futile struggling on the verge of death, shorty. Did you really need to besmirch a delightful memory like this?"

Administrator showed a cold smile, arrogant even with her final trump card destroyed.

"—But well, I guess breaking a single *prototype*'s the limit for you. I am creating hundreds or thousands of those from now on, after all."

Her fingertips on her left hand traced over the pure silver rapier as she bragged, appearing utterly mechanical as though truly devoid of all emotion despite how she should be a copy of Cardinal. Miasma-like, pitch-black waves lazily coiled about her body that had white, porcelain skin that seemed to shine and that lustrous silver hair.

The chilly snake named fear raised its head from the bottom of my body once again. I tightly gripped my arms, now empty, together without thinking.

The sword golem I thought invincible was destroyed, but the cost was far too great. We had lost the one and only sage in this world with abilities on par with Administrator's extraordinary powers.

Contrasting me, who simply looked up at the highest minister, unable to get even a single word out—

Still hovering, Eugeo's sword let out a clear ring and pointed its tip straight at its worst and final enemy.

"Oh my."

Narrowing her specular eyes, Administrator murmured.

"Still up for more, boy? Feeling brave now after breaking my doll by poking through that gap?"

I did not know if those words reached Eugeo now that he had turned into a greatsword. But its pure white blade did not quiver in the slightest, maintaining its sharp tip at the highest minister. The radiance surrounding its blade intensified once more while the reverberations, going kiin, kiin, from it heightened in pitch as well.

"…Stop it, Eugeo."

I wrung out a hoarse voice while extending my left hand towards the gleaming sword.

"Don't… don't go on your own."

Pricked into action by a seething irritation, I shuffled my knees over the burnt floor with legs that lacked any strength. One of the light particles scattered from the sword came into contact with my desperately extended fingers, bounced off, and vanished.

An instant later.

Wings of light spread out once more from the greatsword's handle. Flapping those mighty wings, the white greatsword charged straight towards Administrator.

A vicious smile appeared on the ruler's pearl grey lips. The mirror-like rapier swung down with a grating noise and retaliated by emitting lightning, the same or stronger than those that burnt Cardinal to death.

The sword's tip touched the lightning.

Shock waves exceeding those when the sword golem was destroyed swept out, slamming into my whole body as I knelt far away.

I opened my eyes as wide as I could even while I drew my body in and watched as Administrator's lightning was shredded into numerous thin lines.

Vaaaaa!! The sparks that flew all around with a roar caused small explosions throughout the hall. The sword soared on despite breaking through the torrent of immense energy head-on. Miniscule pieces chipped off the surface of its white blade, scattering one after another. And each of those should be a part of Eugeo's body, his life.

"Eugeo!!"

The raging tempest erased my shout.

"Brat…!!"

The smile vanished from Administrator's lips.

At the source of the lightning at last, the white greatsword's tip landed a certain, fierce hit upon the rapier's needlelike end.

The resulting resonance shook the isolated space with its extremely high frequencies. The silver rapier, a source of resources for supporting Administrator's divine strength, and the white greatsword, fused from Eugeo and the Blue Rose Sword, continued their struggle for several moments. They appeared to be in an absolute deadlock, but all of my skin told me that was a premonition for the destruction yet to come.

The phenomenon that eventually occurred seemed to drag out forever, like it was in slow-motion.

Administrator's rapier shattered into countless miniscule shards.

The white greatsword snapped in half as it emitted particles of light.

The blade, its first half, spun as it was blown away and sliced Administrator's right arm off from the top of her shoulder without a sound.

The sounds and tremors soon caught up to the scene burnt onto my retinae.

The tremendous amount of resources pouring out from the shattered rapier induced a grand, iridescent explosion that swallowed up the hall.

"Eugeo————!!"

My scream was yet again buried in the howls of raging electromagnetic noise this time. The surging shock waves crashed into me and sent me flying to the south window.

Riding out the shock waves behind a sword stabbed in the floor, a part of the sword golem until a few minutes ago, I staggered to my feet and looked—

At Administrator who stood on the floor with her own two feet, pressing down on the wound at her right shoulder with her left hand.

And two large, broken pieces lying at her feet.

A dim, white radiance was still resided on Eugeo's broken sword.

But it pulsed, just like the beating of a heart, as its brilliance faded away to nothing, all while I stared at it in a daze.

The white sword fragments lost their substance as one and gradually began returning to a human form.

The fragment from the heart of the blade to where it tapered off became the lower half of a body.

And the fragment including the crossed guard became the upper half of a body.

Eugeo had his eyelids shut while his right hand, atop his breast, held a crystal prism. It happened then, when his flaxen hair and milky skin regained the tangibility of a human.

A terrifying amount of blood gushed out from both severed parts of his body, immediately soaking Administrator's bare feet.

"Ah…… ah……"

The squeaky voice wrung out from my own throat seemed to come from far away.

The world lost nearly all color; smell and sound, too, were watered down until almost entirely stifled.

The widening red of blood alone appeared shudderingly vivid at the heart of this anesthetized world. Something glistened as it swooped towards Eugeo's side as he lay in the middle of the crimson sea.

It thrust into the puddle of blood, producing a gentle ripple with a tap; it was a slender long sword of bluish-silver—the Blue Rose Sword. It appeared unharmed, or so I thought for an

instant before the bottom half of the its blade abruptly cracked into crystals of ice with a quiet shattering noise.

Losing its support, the top half of the sword slowly slanted and fell over by Eugeo's face. Splattered drops struck Eugeo's cheeks and dripped down.

I took two, three unsteady steps forward before my knees hit the floor.

My arms wrapped around my body as though clinging onto what was left of Cardinal's warmth while my empty eyes stayed open. However, the faint heat could not fill up the desolation spreading within myself. Everything seemed hollow: my consciousness, my flesh, even my soul.

Let it end here.

That thought floated up from the depths of nothingness like a bubble and popped.

We, no, I had lost in every way imaginable.

The only reason I am now here was to release Eugeo's soul to the real world, was it not? Despite that, I was actually protected by Eugeo's sacrifice and now cowered like so, helplessly. I, who would be simply logged out to the other side even if I were to lose my life.

—Now I just need to fade-out from this world, to vanish.

—I want to see no more. I want to hear no more.

I desired solely for my own swift annihilation.

However.

The Underworld, too, was a reality in its own right and its ruler was no program that would stop upon reaching the Bad End screen.

A hint of emotion showed upon Administrator's beautiful, white, and now expressionless features before disappearing immediately. The lovely voice streaming from her lips shook the silence in the hall.

"This must be the first time I suffered an injury of this degree since that battle with Lyceris two hundred years ago."

That murmur seemed to include a trace of praise.

“The sword transmuted from Eugeo’s body… it couldn’t possibly have matched up to my «*Silvery Eternity*» in terms of *priority*, but what an unforeseen turn of events. Also, it was my *mistake* to assume swords would be *metallic*.”

Drops of blood dripped from the wound at her right shoulder, one after another, rippling the red water surface at her feet. Administrator caught those drops onto her left palm, turned them into numerous luminous elements, and touched the wound. The cut sealed in an instant, covered by smooth skin.

“Now…”

Done with her first-aid, the ruler fluttered her long eyelashes and turned her specular eyes towards me.

“It is somewhat surprising for you to be the last one remaining, boy from the other side. I am just a little curious why you’ve come here without any supervisor authorities… but I’m bored and sleepy now. I’ll leave the question for «that person» on the terminal later, let’s put an end to this battle with your blood and screams, boy.”

Administrator closed her mouth and began walking elegantly, showing absolutely no sign of being affecting by the heavy injury of losing her arm. Striding over Eugeo’s sundered body, she left footprints of fresh blood on the marble floor while approaching me.

The girl stretched her left hand straight out to her side as she walked. Something white fluttered to her from behind with that. That was a slender right arm—the part of her that Eugeo’s sword had sliced off.

I thought she would reattach it to her shoulder, but Administrator lifted her own arm before her face by its wrist and lightly breathed onto it. Violet light immediately took the arm and its composition was transmuted as a metallic throb resounded.

What appeared was a silver long sword of simple design, yet with a graceful blade and grip.

It was not polished to a perfect mirror surface like the destroyed rapier, but as expected of one made from the resources of the arm belonging to the human possessing the world’s greatest priority, the power it concealed seemed sufficient to detach my neck with a single strike.

Death approached with faint footsteps. I awaited it on my knees.

Dazzlingly beautiful even with an arm lost, Administrator advanced to right before my eyes in mere seconds and looked down at me.

My upturned gaze clashed with the iridescent light from her specular eyes.

With her two eyes tinged with faint, mild delight, the girl whispered gently.

“Farewell, boy. Let us meet again on the other side someday.”

The long sword rose, gleaming as it reflected the moonlight.

The blade drew a blue arc in the air with its razor-sharp edge as it drew closer to my neck.

In an instant.

A silhouette forced itself into my vision.

Long hair fluttered through the air.

The female knight covered in wounds spread her arms wide; dumbfounded, I stared on at her back.

This wasn’t

the first time I saw this.

How many times

am I

going to——

——repeat this mistake?!!

That thought sped like a flash and time ceased its motions for an instant.

Numerous occurrences lined up in this monochrome world that had lost its sound and color.

A small hand gently touched my right arm, dangling powerlessly.

The warm palm thawed the cold dread and resignation filling my whole body slightly.

The image of loss did not disappear.

But it was fine acknowledging that weakness, the owner of that hand whispered to me.

—You have no need to win every time. Even if you fall, even if you lose, it is of no issue as long as your heart, your will is kept alive by another.

—All of those who had spent the slightest time with you should be of that belief, youngling. Naturally, the same applies to me.

—Thus, you, too, can still stand.

—If you wish to protect those beloved to you.

I realized the subdued warmth from deep in my body, or perhaps my consciousness, had extended a circuit of light towards my frozen fluct light.

From the core of my chest, pass my right shoulder, through my arm, ending at my fingertips.

Blazing heat engulfed the five stiff digits.

Flashing out faster than ever before, my right hand firmly grasped the grip for my black sword that had tumbled right beside me.

And time moved once more.

Administrator's sword descended, targeting Knight Alice's left shoulder as she stood and spread her arms wide in her attempt to protect me.

It happened exactly as the keen blade tore through the scorched knight uniform's sleeve to dig into her pale skin.

The tip of my blade sword, swung hard diagonally upwards while I got to my feet, barely intercepted the silver sword, letting out a fierce burst of sparks.

The impact put Administrator a distance away from Alice and me, driving us behind.

Holding onto Alice in my left hand as she fell onto her chest, I was blown away to the window once again and braced my legs to prevent crashing into the windowpane. Leaning her head against my right shoulder, Alice turned her head slightly towards the left and looked at me with her blue eyes.

"Just look at you…"

Smiling with those cheeks still raw with burns after defending against Administrator's flames, the knight gave a hoarse murmur.

"So you can move… can't you."

“…Yeah.”

I scraped together what could barely pass as a smile in return.

“Leave the rest to me.”

“I shall… do just that.”

Upon finishing those brief words, Alice lost her consciousness once more as her knees collapsed.

Lowering the knight onto the floor as I supported her left arm, I leaned her back against the glass and took a deep breath while I got back up.

—Leave what’s left to me and have a good rest, please.

—This life Charlotte, Cardinal, and Eugeo entrusted me with… I shall connect it to yours.

Even if Alice alone was my limit, I had to evacuate her from this isolated space by all means necessary. For that, I must fight Administrator and make it a draw if not a win. Even with my limbs all sliced off, even with my heart pierced through, even with my neck decapitated.

Hardening my resolve, I shifted my sight upwards and gazed at my enemy.

The smile had all but faded from Administrator and she was looking at the sword she held in her left hand. Maybe the impact from earlier had hurt it as a part of her soft-looking hand was grazed red.

“…Not even I can reel in my irritation forever.”

Her sigh trickled out icily.

The specular eyes aimed at me froze over as if a layer of frost had descended upon them.

“What are the lot of you? Why do you struggle so unseemly against idleness? The result of this battle was clear from the start. What meaning is there in the process to a predetermined end?”

“That process is what really matters. Whether to grovel and die or to die with my sword in my hand. This is why we… are human.”

While replying so, I lowered my eyelids and summoned a strong image of who I once was.

My image of «Kirito the Black Swordsman» that I had always kept locked away for so long. My other self that could never lose—one like a curse that would leave me nowhere to go upon defeat, or so I feared from the depths of my heart.

But I could no longer be bound by that anxiety and obsession.

My long fringe was casted over my eyes when I lifted them open. After combing it up with my left hand, covered in a fingerless glove, and spreading out my long black leather coat, I braced myself with the long sword in my right hand.

Standing a short distance away, Administrator knitted her brows slightly before showing a cruel smile close to what she had on when she stole Cardinal's life.

"That pitch-black appearance… it's just like that of a darkness knight from the Dark Territory. …Very well. If you wish to suffer to the bitter end, I will grant you an extremely, extremely drawn out and merciless fate. One that will make you fervently plead for a rapid end to your life."

"That's not enough… I can't redeem my foolishness with just that."

With my waist lowered after that murmur, I watched the silver long sword held in the highest minister's left hand.

Administrator had flaunted her sacred arts' devastating might countless times, but now that the pure silver rapier, seemingly named «Silvery Eternity», that served as her source of resources was destroyed, she would likely be unable to rapidly fire high priority arts in succession. That was why she had transformed her own arm into a new sword.

I was all for a fight between swords, but I had no information at all on the opponent's competency. She probably used a style like the knights, mainly focusing on single heavy blows, but my battle with Knight Alice on the cathedral's eightieth floor had clearly shown that was nothing to look down on.

My weapon's priority value was probably worse, so the little Life left in the black sword would be spent after continuous clashes. I had no choice but to get within range and seize victory with consecutive hits skills which she should not know about.

Firming my resolve, I lowered my center of gravity farther in preparation to charge. My right and left feet were planted on the floor in the front and back respectively.

My opponent, Administrator, stood calmly as she raised the sword in her left hand up high towards the back. As expected, it was a stance from the High Norkia style, a traditional school. The absurd speed and weight behind that attack would probably kill in a single hit and be impossible to parry. I had to dodge that somehow and slip in closer.

"……"

I took in a deep breath and gathered strength in my abdomen.

The moment Administrator's sword made the slightest movement, I kicked off the floor with all I had and advanced.

The enemy's long sword was tinged in a blue radiance. Recognizing the unleashed secret move, no, sword skill as «Vertical», I stomped down with my left foot and shifted my charge towards the right. As Vertical was a single vertical slash, it would be tough to chase an enemy that fled beyond its range.

Tracing a blue streak, the silver long sword drove in with terrifying speed. With my body opened up towards the left and I desperately tried to slip pass the sword's tip. The straight line tore through the hem of my long coat as it flapped strongly.

—Dodged it!

This time, I stepped hard on the floor with my right foot and restored the direction of my charge while raising the sword in my right hand—

But.

The brilliance on Administrator's sword did not fade.

"……!?"

I gasped in surprise as the sword that had nearly swung all the way down to my feet bounced back up at a speed that ignored inertia. This was no time to dodge. Withdrawing the sword I was raising, I somehow managed to cut it into the slash's path.

Gaiiiin! A massive metallic noise was let loose with enormous sparks. Though my defense succeeded somehow, I had to jump back to avoid having my stance destroyed and falling over from the pressure that was heavy enough to make the bones at my right hand creak. Dodging the enemy's upwards slash with a step, I immediately went for a counterattack—

But Administrator's skill with the sword exceeded my expectations yet again.

The sword returned overhead after tracing out the shape of a V and roared again as it swung down. With my balance shifted forward, I could not evade the third attack and it made a shallow cut at the left of my chest. It was a graze, but what ran through my body were fear and shock rather than pain.

If the sword skill Administrator executed was the one I knew.

It will slash through me if I tried dodging or a blocking half-heartedly here.

"O… oohh!!"

Hurling off my fear with a shout, I activated a sword skill from a rather unreasonable posture. The single-hit slash, «Slant».

My expectation struck home at last this time and Administrator's sword returned overhead so quickly it seemed like it had teleported before unleashing its fourth attack with all its might.

I met the blade of white silver approaching from straight above with my black sword. Explosive light effects unique to when sword skills clashed against each other came forth and lit up both the highest minister's and my faces.

The fourth attack of that four-hit skill could not be fully absorbed by a basic single-hit skill normally. But it was lucky how Administrator currently lacked her right arm. That had disturbed her balance and caused the slash to slide diagonally down, leftwards.

Gyariin! The two swords separated with a metallic ring and I jumped back, hard, for real this time, leaving her range.

Faint red tainted my fingers after touching the wound on my chest with my left hand. There was no need to heal damage of this degree with arts, but rather than the flesh wound, it was the fresh slit on the leather coat with a far higher priority value than it seemed—though actualized from my image—that made me shudder.

I could not speak; in my stead, Administrator leisurely straightened herself up while she spoke.

"—One-handed straight sword, four-hit *sword skill*, «*Vertical Square*»… wasn't it?"

There was a slight lag before the voice that reached my ears turned into meaningful words.

The skill's name was as I had expected. But—

Sword skill.

Did Administrator just say that?

Certainly, the Underworld had the same groups of sword skills as the old world of SAO. But they were called «secret moves» and recognized as power residing in the swords after lengthy training rather than *system assist*.

Not to mention how the secret moves used of those of the Human World were limited to single-hit skills like «Lightning Flash Slash (Vertical)», «Whirl Current (Cyclone)», and «Heavenly Mountain Rending Wave (Avalanche)». That was the main reason why I could win through the many matches, practice and real, with the «Aincrad-style consecutive hits skills» and I thought that would have been my only chance at victory in this final battle as well.

But if Administrator could use sword skills, and the mighty skills of over four hits to boot, that advantage would cease to exist.

Eugeo's figure, fallen from that fatal wound, entered my slowly retreating vision while confusion and unease assailed me. Blood still spread from where he was split. Just how minutes remained until his Life runs out?

I thought as anxiety consumed me further.

Eugeo had his memory temporarily sealed and fought against me as an integrity knight. That meant his memories were scanned through the Synthesis Ritual. That meant there was the possibility that the highest minister had scooped out the name and motion for Vertical Square from Eugeo's memories.

If this guess proved accurate, Administrator should be able to use no more than the intermediate skills for one-handed straight swords. After all, I had never shown my partner any of the advanced skills.

Thus, I would have a chance at victory if I performed a skill with over four hits.

The best of the one-handed straight sword skills certainly did go up to ten hits. This was no longer any time to hold back.

Administrator let out a giggle as she looked upon me quickly separating my feet and fixing the grip on my black sword.

"My… your eyes can still stay so defiant? Very good, entertain me more, boy."

Though a large chunk of her Life should have been lost along with her arm, the highest minister still said so with the utmost composure. I spoke no more in return, taking in a deep breath and holding it in.

I vividly recalled the image of that sword skill carved into both my body and my memories. A look revealed a faint bluish-white light effect already beginning to cover the sword in my right hand.

My sword drew an arc as I swung it from the right to straight overhead—

"—Haahh!!"

I let out a sharp war cry while activating the most advanced sword skill for one-handed straight swords, «Nova Ascension».

Backed by an unseen force, my body soared into the air at an extreme speed. The first hit was a rapid downwards slash that bested almost all other sword skills in terms of speed. There was no skill that exceeded this speed for one-handed straight swords.

The slash had half a second before it would dig into Administrator's left shoulder.

My sensations accelerated and in that time, where all seemed heavy like immersed in jelly—

The silver long sword turned its end straight towards me.

A steel silver flash traced out a cross-shaped brilliance.

Dokakakakakaa!! Six thrusts stabbed at divine speed first vertically, then horizontally on my body.

"Gah…"

Fresh blood scattered from my mouth.

My ten-hit skill, interrupted on its initial hit, halted with its ice-blue glow futilely dispersing.

I could not even register what had conspired in my mind, let alone make any guesses at the cause. Overwhelmed by pain and fear, I stared at Administrator's sword, drawn from my stomach, as I staggered away.

Six consecutive hits consisting entirely of thrusts.

No such sword skill existed under the one-handed straight sword category.

Fresh blood gushed freely from the small wounds bored into my shoulders, chest, throat, and stomach. I slumped down, strength leaving my knees, and thrust my sword into the floor as I desperately struggled against collapsing.

Having kept a distance away as if to avoid the spurting blood, Administrator hid her mouth with the sword with a blade which appeared to have become narrower than before.

"Ufufufu… what a pity, boy."

With the upturned corners of her lips slightly visible beyond the sharp edge, the exquisite ruler announced in a sneer.

"Rapier, six-hit skill, «*Crucifixion*»."

——No way.

I hadn't shown Eugeo that skill. In the first place, I couldn't use that skill. I had only seen it time after time, long ago, in Aincrad.

The world seemed to lurch. No, I was the one lurching. I frantically sought an answer for the inexplicable development thrust at me.

—Was it my memories she peeked into?

—She stole that skill from my fluct light…? Even so, could the highest minister perfectly pull off a skill that I had all but forgotten…?

"No way…"

A murmur leaked out from my mouth, one so strained that I could hardly believe it was my own voice.

"Impossible… that's impossible…"

My clenched teeth gnashed. Perhaps wanting to drown out an unexplainable anger and a fear that refused to leave my back, I roughly drew my sword from the floor, stood my unsteady feet firmly on the floor, and made no attempt to conceal my stance.

The left hand out and the right hand drawn in. The posture for the one-hit certain kill skill that defeated Chudelkin, Vorpal Strike.

The gap between us was roughly five meters. That was perfectly enough.

"U… aaaah!!"

I screamed out from deep in my abdomen, forcibly wringing out my wilting power of imagination. The sword notched atop my shoulder gleamed a ferocious crimson red. Was that the color of blood—or a naked intent to murder?

Administrator, in response—

Spread her feet front and back and lowered her waist like me, before turning the rapier in her left hand to the right of her waist in a smooth motion and stopping still there.

Proving my impression few seconds ago was no hallucination, the blade that had turned into a narrow rapier changed its form once more.

A blade, thicker with an increased width, had a gentle curve. A single-edged, narrowed curved sword. That appeared just like.

No, this is no longer the time to think. This rage was all I needed.

“——Uoaaahh!!”

My sword shot forth with my beastly roar.

“——Shii!!”

A cry came from Administrator’s lips too, subdued yet sharp.

The sword at the right of her waist gleamed blindingly silver.

Tracing out a faster, more beautiful curved trajectory than the straight line my Vorpal Strike plunged in as.

The flash that combined a drawing motion with a slash in the same stroke torn into my chest.

Its impact blew me away slightly after like a punch from a giant. Much of my remaining Life scattered into the air as crimson fluid while I flew up.

The words coming from Administrator with her left hand swung out dimly reached my ears.

“Katana, single-hit skill, «Absolute Void (Zekkuu)».”

A sword skill beyond my knowledge.

Assailed by what seemed like the world crumbling about me, far more intense than simple fear, I fell onto the floor. Damp noises reverberated as fresh blood scattered all about me.

But that blood was not shed by me. I had fallen into the horrifyingly large pool of blood that flowed out from Eugeo’s severed body.

I froze entirely; only my eyes could move. I earnestly directed them towards Eugeo… the upper section of his body lying immediately at my side.

My partner of two years had his pallid face inclined towards me with his eyelids closed. Blood still ran, slowly, from his severe wound and I could not tell whether his Life had already ran out, or if there was still a little left, but I doubted his consciousness would ever return.

There was only one thing that I was certain of.

I had wasted the life that he had saved.

I could not win against Administrator.

A battle of sacred arts would be a foregone conclusion, and the highest minister surpassed me even in a battle between swords.

I no longer had any means of finding out exactly how she had learnt her variety of sword skills. At the very least, it was definitely from neither Eugeo's nor my memories.

Sword skills were not included in the general purpose package, «The Seed», used as the architecture for the Underworld. ALfheim Online, which inherited the old SAO server, was the only one with that installed. But the engineers from Rath who constructed the Underworld shouldn't have stolen the sword skill system from the ALO server, let alone Administrator herself.

It was pointless pondering without action any further. Even if I were to discover the truth, the fact that I had nothing left was already set in stone.

Charlotte's devotion, Eugeo's determination, Alice's resolve… and Cardinal's will; I had—

"—What a lovely face."

The voice caressed my nape like an ice-cold blade as I lay fallen.

Administrator's bare feet stepped across the marble floor as I sensed her presence gracefully drawing closer.

"Is it thanks to the display of emotions being different for humans of the other side, after all, I wonder? I wish I could keep that weeping face of yours as an ornament for all of eternity."

Melodious stifled laughter.

"Still, I had always thought sword fights as bothersome and nothing more, but this does have its own charm to it. It's lovely feeling your opponent's suffering directly. I hardly come across this chance, boy, so could I have you hold on for a little? Let me enjoy hacking off your limbs from their ends."

"…Do as you like."

I answered in an inaudible voice.

"Hurt me as much as you want, then kill me…"

I should suffer tens of times of what Eugeo and Cardinal had experienced before I disappeared from this world, at least.

With my strength to speak gone, the strength in my right hand, stuck to my black sword's grip, too, left—

It was then.

Someone whispered into my ear.

"It isn't… like you. To… give up."

Disconnected, and on the verge of vanishing.

Yet distinct enough to identify its owner without doubt.

I could think of nothing as my sight shifted once more.

Those nostalgic green eyes that almost drew out my tears looked at me from beyond those barely raised eyelids.

"Eu… geo."

Turning towards me as I hoarsely called out his name, my partner showed a mild smile.

I was forced immobile from pain and fear after the sword golem's attack had cut through my stomach. But that could not compare to the wound Eugeo had suffered. His bones, his internal organs were thoroughly sliced through. That pain should have been enough to even destroy his fluct light—

"Kirito."

Eugeo spoke once more in a somewhat stronger voice.

"Back then, I… did not do a thing when Alice was taken away… Despite how you… the young you had… so bravely, stood up against, the integrity knight…"

"…Eugeo…"

I immediately understood he was referring to his memories of Alice being taken away from Rulid eight years ago.

But I wasn't there. I wondered if he had confused it with another scene for a moment, but the clear light resting in his green eyes convinced me, without the slightest doubt, that he was telling the truth.

"…So… it's my turn… to nudge you forward. Now, Kirito… you can still, stand back up. No matter, how times it takes, you can… still stand…"

Eugeo's right hand jerked.

I watched through my flowing tears as those fingers picked up something metallic, gleaming bluish-silver, from the pool of blood—the Blue Rose Sword by its grip.

Gripping his cherished sword that had lost half of its blade within the blood pouring from himself, Eugeo shut his eyes.

A sudden, warm scarlet light engulfed us. The red sea pulsed with light below us.

"What are….!?"

Administrator shouted out in a voice filled with anger. But the almighty ruler shielded her face with her left hand, as though terrified by the scarlet light, and stepped back.

The brilliance of the sea of blood intensified without end and at last, turned into countless dots of light as they floated up as one.

After fluttering about in the air for a moment, the beads of light whirled as they descended once more, drawn in by the Blue Rose Sword Eugeo held.

A new blade grew from where the sword split.

Transmutation.

My breath stopped as the miracle, only the two supervisors of this world were supposed to be capable of, was performed before my eyes. Overwhelming emotions swirled up from my chest and trickled out as fresh tears.

Upon regaining its original length after an instant, the Blue Rose Sword then had its detailed carving of a rose, its namesake, turn crimson. Its blade, its guard, its grip were all being dyed a vivid red.

Eugeo offered the beautiful weapon, what should now be renamed «Red Rose Sword», to me with a trembling arm.

Despite how it lacked all sensation a moment ago, my left hand moved and held the sword's handle along with Eugeo's hand as though drawn in by it.

Immediately, energy flowed into the deepest, furthest parts of my body.

This was no art.

This was definitely the power born of Eugeo's will. A power, incarnation, brought forth solely from his mind.

I surely felt the resonance of our souls, crossing the worlds from Eugeo's fluct light to mine.

Strength left Eugeo's hand and it fell, feebly, upon entrusting the sword to me. Brief words travelled from his lips that put on another smile; no, they travelled from his consciousness to mine.

[Now, stand, Kirito. My closest friend... My... hero.....]

The pain from the wounds pierced into my whole body vanished.

The cold emptiness deep in my chest evaporated within a flaring heat.

I stared firmly at Eugeo's profile, his eyelids shut again, and whispered.

"Yeah… I will. I'll get back up no matter how many times it takes, for you."

Holding my two arms that felt nothing until seconds ago up high, I stabbed the black and red swords my hands gripped into the floor and stood up as I gritted my teeth.

My body held nearly no regard for my orders. My legs trembled in small jerks and my arms weighed down like lead. But still, I staggered a step forward, two.

Administrator slowly turned her averted face back towards us, white flames of anger in her eyes as they focused on me.

"——Why."

The voice that came out was deep, distorted, with a metallic ring.

"Why do you oppose your fate so foolishly?"

"…That is the only…"

I replied in a low, dry voice.

"Opposing you is the only reason I am here for."

My feet continued even then, advancing earnestly even as they threatened to fold time after time.

The two swords I held in my hands felt incredibly heavy.

But it was their tangible presences that granted me strength, moving my two legs forward.

I had entered battle with two swords in my hands and my life on the line like this countless times a long, long time ago, in a different world. This was my… «Dual Blades» Kirito's true form.

Upon invoking the overwriting phenomenon with my imagination again, my long coat regenerated the tears it had in various spots in an instant. Though the damage I had suffered remained, there was no use bothering with how much Life I had left. I could still fight as long as I was capable of moving my limbs and swinging a sword.

With an expression filled with rage directed at me, Administrator took a slow step back.

Perhaps noticing how she had retreated a second later, her pale, beautiful features showed an look of indignation like that of a crazed god.

"…Unforgivable."

Her mouth wavered beyond the transparent flames formed from the words uttered without her lips moving.

"This is my world. I cannot possibly forgive such conduct from an uninvited intruder. Genuflect. Offer me your head. —Swear your allegiance!!"

The highest minister's roar stirred the air and an aura of bluish-black darkness rose from her feet, swirling about repeatedly. Having returned to a one-handed straight sword from a katana, the sword turned straight towards me while darkness coiled around it.

"…No."

Stopping my feet right before entering the range of sword skills, I voiced out my last words.

"You merely usurped it. One who does not love this world… and the people living in it has no right to be its ruler!!"

I took up a stance the moment I ended my words. The Red Rose Sword in my left hand in the front; the black sword in my right hand in the rear.

Drew back my right foot. Lowered my waist.

Administrator, too, slowly swung the silver sword in her left hand up and held it aloft. The words her pearl grey lips repeated endlessly carried an unparalleled sense of intimidation.

"Love is to dominate. I love all. I dominate over all!!"

The silver sword grew as it exuded a heavy darkness. Vivid red mingled with the dark aura of the blade that had instantly grew to the size of a two-handed sword. The massive blade immediately fell like a raging sea. High Norkia-style secret move, «Heavenly Mountain Rending Wave»—also known as the two-handed sword, single-hit skill, «Avalanche».

I firmly received, with my two crossed swords, the very symbol of the aristocracy in the Underworld and the skill that had always tormented Eugeo and me so. Dual blades, weapon defending skill, «Cross Block».

"Ooohh!"

I gathered all of my strength with a roar and repelled the enemy's sword. Faint shock ran through the highest minister's eyes.

"Such impertinence!"

The shouting highest minister jumped back far as she lifted the silver long sword, now back to its original one-handed sword form, to the height of her left shoulder.

I, too, drew the black sword in my right hand back to the opposite position.

The same reverberations resembling those of an external combustion engine came from both swords, resounding loud in sync.

The black and silver swords let out crimson radiance.

Administrator and I kicked off the floor simultaneously and unleashed the exact same sword skill—Vorpal Strike.

Forming a perfect mirror image of each other, the two swords were drawn to their limits like arrows and their light effects burst after an instant of charging up, shooting forth.

Each sword advanced on the same line and their tips grazed against each other slightly as they passed.

A heavy impact sliced off my right arm from below my shoulder.

But my sword, too, severed Administrator's left arm from its base.

The two arms still holding onto their swords whirled high up as they traced out beams of deep crimson light.

"Damn youuuuuuu!!"

Having lost both arms, Administrator's eyes flared up with iridescent flames.

Her long silver hair stood up on ends as though alive and formed countless squirming thorns. Those innumerable pointed ends became sharp needles as they rushed in to pierce through me.

"Not yeeeeeett!!"

The Red Rose Sword I held in my left hand emitted a new crimson flash with my scream.

The second hit of the dual blades Vorpal Strike, impossible in Aincrad, broke through the swirl of raging silver hair—

And stabbed deep into the middle of Administrator's chest.

Absurdly rigid and tangible resistance soaked deep through my palm. A sensation so vivid, it wiped my mind of the pain from when the rapier pierced through me, from being slashed into by the katana, and from having my right arm severed by the straight sword.

I was painfully conscious of the sword tip tearing into Administrator's smooth skin, breaking her sternum, and blowing her heart within away—of taking a human's life, in other words. An act I had always dreaded deep in my heart since I realized the humans of this world possessed real fluct lights. The fear did not disappear even when I unleashed that sword skill on the chief elder, Chudelkin.

But there wasn't a shred of hesitation in this one strike. Wavering here would definitely be unforgivable for the future Cardinal had entrusted to us.

And the same probably went for the prideful ruler, Administrator.

Such thoughts flashed through my mind for a mere instant.

The Red Rose Sword, stabbed through the middle of the highest minister's chest, let out an intense brilliance that easily surpassed the light effects of sword skills.

The blade regenerated from the resources of Eugeo's blood shone dazzlingly, like a fragment from a star—

In the next moment, the resources all burst; that was to say, an enormous explosion occurred.

Administrator's two eyes opened up to their limits and a silent scream escaped her lips.

Slender lines of light poured out from all over the world's most beautiful bare body, spreading out in a radial pattern.

And an explosion of pure energy swallowed all as it swelled out.

Blown away like discarded cotton, I crashed into the south glass window. I felt blood gushing out from the wound on my right shoulder the moment I bounced off and slammed onto the floor.

It seemed even strange I still had this much blood left after all of those cuts. I wondered if my Life had finally reached zero for a moment, but my tasks wasn't over yet. I had to live for a little longer.

A look at the sword in my left hand showed that its blade had returned to half of its length and the rose carving, too, turned back to blue. Gently placing the sword on the floor, I gripped my right shoulder hard with all five fingers.

Curiously enough, white light poured from my palm even without me reciting any arts and warmly soaked into my wound. I released my hand the moment I felt the blood cease. I shouldn't use too much of the space resources that should have almost been depleted.

Thrusting my left hand, the light gone from it, onto the floor, I lifted myself up.

And let out a sharp gasp.

Beyond the beads of light, the remains of the explosion, slowly drifting through the air—

The silver-haired girl who should have been blown away without a trace stood on her two unsteady feet.

She could hardly be termed human by this point. Her two arms were gone, a huge hole had opened up in the core of her chest, and cracks, like ceramics on the verge of breaking, spread out all over her body.

What flowed out from those countless wounds was not blood.

What resembled sparks of silver and violet fizzled as they gushed out hard and scattered throughout the air. Upon witnessing the scene, I couldn't help but think Administrator, too, did not have a body of flesh and blood any longer like those turned into swords.

The long hair that was once like molten platinum lost its light as well and hung down in disarray. Her mouth moved in the darkness beneath and the moans leaking out reached my ears.

"…To think… there would be, two swords… that aren't, metallic… Fufu, fu…"

The ruler's shoulders shook jerkily like a broken doll as she let out a brief laugh despite the circumstances.

"Unexpected… what an, unexpected, outcome…"

I couldn't help but imagine a nightmare where Administrator healed her injuries in an instant and wrung out a thin breath stuck in my throat.

With one foot in the grave, the ruler slowly turned her near-destroyed body. Sparks spilled from her various wounds while she started taking awkward steps like a toy with its battery cut.

Her destination was the north of the hall. There wasn't a single object there, but there must be something. I had to finish her off before she reached.

I got onto my feet after frantic efforts and stared at her frame, which seemed diminished from before, from behind. I gave chase, dragging my legs in a manner more awkward than even the highest minister.

Administrator who had gotten twenty meters in front seemed to be heading towards a certain point. But the girl should not have any means of escaping from this isolated space deprived of resources. After all, Cardinal had said that it would be no easy task to re-connect it even with a few minutes and Administrator had not denied that.

There really wasn't anything where the highest minister came to a stop several tens of seconds later.

But after turning her bare body covered in injuries, the girl looked at me chasing behind and gave a deep laugh.

"Fu, fu… With things, as they are, I have… no choice. It would be, quite a bit earlier, than I had planned… but I suppose I shall go, a step quicker.

"Wh… what are…"

-you saying; it happened before I could ask.

Administrator lifted her right leg covered in cracks and stepped down audibly.

A mysterious circular pattern was on the charred remains of the carpet under her feet. A pattern exceedingly similar to the one denoting the elevating platform behind me, yet somehow different.

From the circle with a diameter of fifty centimeters came a violet light—that familiar color of this world's systems in general.

It drew up from within the glowing circle with mild vibrations.

A white marble pillar.

Atop it was a single notebook computer.

"Wha……"

My feet tangled together from the overwhelming surprise and I fell onto my knees there.

It wasn't exactly like those notebook PCs of the real world. Its casing was translucent, much like crystal, and the same went for its light purple screen. It bore an extremely large resemblance to the system console in virtual worlds I saw just once back in Aincrad.

In other words, that was it.
The «communication device to the outside world» I had been seeking for these two years.

Pushed on by an impulse that practically hurt, I pawed at the floor with my left hand and crawled forward. But my progress was despairingly slow and the spot where Administrator stood seemed hopelessly far away.

With both arms lost, the ruler had a lock of her silver hair lift up like a living being and swiftly typed on the keyboard with its tip. A small window opened up on the holo-screen and some sort of indicator began counting down.

A pillar of violet light immediately appeared at Administrator's feet—

Her hurt body lifted up in silence.

Here, the girl finally raised her face and looked straight at me.

Her features that boasted of perfection were in a tragic state. Large cracks had developed on its left and opaque darkness filled where the eye should be. Her lips that sparkled pearl grey, too, were now like paper, but the smile appearing there carried the chill of the extreme north like always.

Her unharmed right eye curtly narrowed and Administrator gave a short laugh once more.

"Fu, fu… see you, boy. Let's… meet again. This time, in your world."

I finally realized Administrator's intentions upon hearing those words.

The girl was trying to escape to the real world.

She planned to slip out from this Underworld with its absolute limit termed Life and maintain her fluct light. Like what I was going to do for Eugeo's and Alice's souls.

"Wa…. wait!!"

I shouted as I crawled on in desperation.

If I was her, I would destroy that terminal on the verge of my escape. Every single one of my hopes would crumble if that happened.

Administrator's bare body slowly but steadily rose on the ladder of light.

Her broadly smiling lips mouthed out a soundless farewell.

Go- od-

by-

e…

It was right before she finished forming that last syllable.

A shriek rang out from someone who had crept up to the base of the console with neither Administrator nor I noticing.

“Your Eminenceeee…… bring me, along, toooooo……”

Chief Elder Chudelkin.

The clown, whose body should have pierced through by my sword skill and disposed of by Administrator, showed a bizarre expression on his colorless round face and extended his two hands towards the skies, his fingers bent like claws.

His small frame exuded scorching flames.

Was it an art or maybe the power of incarnation—? Having turned his very own self into a flaming clown, Chudelkin flew into a spiral.

Not even Administrator was unaffected as her face, too, showed surprise and what was likely fear.

Even as the highest minister was trying to reach the gateway for the passage of light, her two feet were caught by Chudelkin’s two fiery hands.

Stretched long, the clown’s body continued creeping towards the Administrator’s bare body in circle and wrapped around her like a snake. Blazing crimson flames engulfed the pair.

Administrator’s hair flared up from the ends as though melting.

Her lips warped and emitted a shout that was almost a scream.

“Let go…! Release me, you boor!!”

But a smile of supreme bliss appeared on Chudelkin’s utterly round face as though his master’s words were like a love confession.

“Aaaah… at last… at last, we can become one, Your Eminence…”

His two stumpy arms hugged Administrator's body tight. The cracks on the girl's skin turned red hot and small flakes broke off one after another.

"To a hideous clown… like you… I'm…!"

Those words were nearly screamed out. The silver sparks spurting from the highest minister's body interweaved with Chudelkin's flames and illuminated the hall with glaring light.

Chudelkin's body had lost its form before I knew it and became a clump of flames. His ecstatic expression alone remained at the core and boomed out his final words.

"Aah… Your Eminence… my… Administrator… sa… ma…"

And Administrator's body, too, began bursting into flames from its end.

Fear and anger vanished from the ruler's face, engulfed in flames, as those silver eyes looked up at the skies. The highest minister retained her sublime beauty even now despite being completely broken.

"……A world…… of my own…… I……"

I couldn't catch anything beyond that.

The raging inferno rapidly subsided.

It was let loose as a flash of silver.

Rather than an explosion, it seemed more like all had been reduced to light, filling the space. Nothing roared out or shook; a thought simply spread out, crossing even the walls of the isolated space: the soul that had lived the longest in the Underworld had been extinguished.

The silver light's luminance quietly stayed on for so long, it seemed as though the world might never ever be the same again.

But eventually, it began to fade and color returned to my sight.

I blinked my two eyes, tears flowing from them perhaps due to being burnt by the light, while desperately fixing them at the heart of the explosion.

There wasn't even a single trace that the girl and clown existed now as far as I could see. The pillar of light had vanished as well, leaving behind only the marble pillar and crystal virtual console sticking out from the floor.

I understood, both rationally and instinctively, that the highest minister, Administrator, or the woman named Quinella had been completely annihilated at last. Her Life had turned zero and light cube storing that fluct light was reset.

Probably in the same manner as the light cube likely lined up beside hers, Cardinal's.

"…..It's over… isn't it……?"

I muttered without thinking with my knees still on the floor.

"……Was that good enough… Cardinal…?"

There was no reply.

But I felt a mild breeze from my memories brush against my cheeks.

A breeze suffused with the scent when our bodies touched at the bottom of the Great Library Room, Cardinal's fragrance—of aged books, candles, and sweet confectionary.

I wiped away my tears with my left arm. Noticing only now that the sleeve had returned to the black shirt from the leather long coat, I turned and crawled towards Eugeo who lay close to the room's heart.

Blood still continued dripping from my partner's brutally severed body, with long pauses between each drop. There weren't even minutes before his Life ran out.

Having reached Eugeo's side after my frantic advance, I first carried his lower half that had tumbled a distance away and perfectly joined them where they were severed to stop the blood.

And holding my left hand out to the wound, I visualized the image of a healing light.

The white light produced under my palm was faint to the point where it couldn't be seen unless one strained their eyes. But still, I earnestly pushed the light on and tried to seal the wound.

But—

The red fluid, Eugeo's life, continued running from the severance and showed no sign of stopping. The priority level of the healing art was despairingly insufficient for the extent of the wound. My mind understood that; yet my hands moved relentlessly and I shouted.

"Stop… stop! Why!!"

Imagination determined all in the Underworld. Any miracle could be brought about if one wished hard enough. Wasn't that how it was?

I wrung out all my soul had and prayed, hoped, and wished.

But Eugeo's blood still fell, a drop followed by another.

Overwriting by imagination was limited to objects' positions and outward appearances; it could not change numerical stats like priority level and durability—

That logic crossed a corner of my consciousness, but I refused to acknowledge it.

"Eugeo… come back to me! Eugeo!!"

I shouted once more, then held my left wrist in my mouth in preparation to bite through it. I knew that wouldn't possibly be enough, but still, I had to pour in all the resources I could create now. Even if that ended up in both of our Lives turning to zero.

It was exactly when I sunk my canines into my skin to tear it off with my flesh.

A near inaudible whisper called out my name.

"……Kirito."

My face twitched up.

Eugeo lifted his eyelids the slightest bit and smiled.

His face was bluish-white, more so than even moonlight, and color was completely absent from his lips. It was evident his Life was still dropping on, unchangingly. But his green eyes were the same as when we first met, staring at me while filled with a gentle glint.

"Eugeo…!"

I shouted hoarsely.

"Just wait, I'll heal you right away! I won't let you die… I definitely won't let you die!"

I tried to chew through my wrist once again.

But a moment quicker. A right hand, cold like ice yet warm like bathed in sunlight, covered my left wrist and gently squeezed.

"Eu…"

I saw Eugeo hold me back while smiling at me. The password between us exchanged countless times back at the academy rolled off those lips.

"*Stay cool*… Kirito."

"……!"

A deep breath was drawn into my trembling chest.

I taught Eugeo this phrase as one for farewells. But I didn't teach him that to hear it like this… in a place like this. I was sure about that.

Eugeo's whispers entered my ears again while I shook my head endlessly.

"It's… okay. This is… okay, Kirito."

"What are you saying! Of course it isn't!!"

Eugeo's smile that somewhat seemed fulfilled remained even after hearing my shouts that were practically screams.

"…I… had accomplished, what I, needed to… Here is where… our paths, separate…"

"No they won't! I won't accept something like destiny!! There is no way I will accept it!!"

As though admonishing me who argued on vehemently like a child, with weeps mixed between my words, Eugeo slowly shook his head. Even those small motions must have taken tremendous effort, but my partner showed no sign of wincing at all and continued speaking.

"…If it didn't, end up like this… you and I, would likely have, to fight… for Alice in, our own ways. I… to restore Alice's memories… and you, to protect, Integrity Knight Alice's, soul…"

My breath choked in that instant.

That was the exact future I feared deep in my heart yet chose to continue averting my awareness from. After all of the battles ended, would I truly be able to go with the act of returning Alice Schuberg's «memory fragment» to Knight Alice's fluct light—that was the doubt.

I had no answer for that, even now.

I shoved that doubt into Eugeo with my tears.

"Then… we'll fight!! We'll heal up all of our injuries and then fight!! You're already stronger than me!! So, fight with me… for your Alice…!"

But Eugeo's distinct smile remained.

“My… sword has already… been broken. Besides… my weaknesses… have led the highest minister to dominate my heart… and turn my sword on you, Kirito. I have to… redeem myself… for that sin…”

“That’s no sin! You wouldn’t commit any!!”

Grabbing Eugeo’s right hand instead with my left, I squeezed out my weeping voice.

“You have always fought splendidly! If you weren’t there, we wouldn’t have beaten Chudelkin, or the sword golem, or Administrator! So, please, you don’t have to blame yourself anymore, Eugeo!!”

“……Really, now… That would… be nice……”

Large teardrops welled up from Eugeo’s eyes after his murmurs and gently flowed away in silence.

“…Kirito. I had always… envied you. You, stronger than anyone else… loved by everyone… I thought… that even Alice would… That frightened me… But… I understand now. Love… is not something to, seek out… it is something, to give. Alice… taught me… that…”

Eugeo cut off his words and lifted his left hand.

His palm, hurt and worn-out from the fierce battles, held a small crystal. A transparent hexagonal prism pointed at its two ends. Alice’s memory fragment.

The transparent prism flickered faintly as it came into contact with my left hand.

White light swallowed the world.

It all vanished, be it the rigid floor or the pain from my severed right arm. A gentle stream carried my soul somewhere far away. Even the immense grief consuming my chest gently thawed within the warm light.

And then—

Vivid greenery flickered into my vision, swaying high above.

Sunlight passed through the trees.

As though extolling the spring sunlight finally here, the budding trees reached out with all their small forms had, rustling in the breeze. Small, unknown birds flew from one glossy, black branch to another as they chased after each other.

“Come on, get those hands moving, Kirito.”

Suddenly called by name, I turned my sight back from the treetop.

The golden hair of the girl sitting by my side glittered brilliantly in the sunlight filtered through the trees. After blinking several times, I shrugged my shoulders and replied.

“Weren’t you were looking at that family of cotton rabbits with your mouth wide open yourself, Alice?”

“My mouth wasn’t wide open!”

Averting her face with a humph, the girl in a dress and pinafore of blue and white—Alice Schuberg—lifted what was in her hands before holding it up to the sunlight.

A carefully sewn leather sheath for a small sword. Its surface sparkled after polished with oil and cloth, and it had a dragon embroidered on with pure white thread. The dragon that somehow seemed friendly had only its tail cut off halfway, with a threaded needle dangling from its tip.

“Look, I’ll be done in just a bit more. How about you?”

I lowered my eyes to my lap as instructed.

In my hands was a small sword carved from a branch of platinum oak, the second hardest variant found in these woods. With the method of processing it from uncle Garitta who knew this forest best, I had gave this wood, tough as steel, shape after spending two months on it. Its blade was already completed and I only needed to touch up its handle.

“I’m way quicker. This is all that’s left.”

Alice spoke with a bright grin after my reply.

“Then keep at it for a little longer and finish it up.”

“Okay.”

A look up through the tree branches once more showed that Solus had already passed beyond the center of the sky. We had worked since morning in this secret spot, so I guess it really might be best to get back to the village soon.

“Hey… we should go back soon. He’ll find out.”

I said so while shaking my head and Alice pouted her lips like a small kid.

“We’re still safe. Just a little more… just a bit more, okay?”

“Guess there’s no helping it. Just a bit more, you got that?”

We exchanged nods and immersed ourselves in our individual work for several minutes.

“I’m done!”

“It’s over!”

Our two coincident voices were accompanied by the rustling sound of stepping on grass coming from behind.

I swung around while hiding what was in my hands behind my back in a panic.

Standing there with a blank look was a boy with fluffy-looking flaxen hair in a frizzy short cut—Eugeo.

Eugeo’s distinct green eyes blinked and he spoke out in a voice filled with suspicion.

“I was wondering where the both of you were since this morning, but you were both in a place like this, huh. Just what were you up to?”

Alice and I cowered, our heads lowered, as we exchanged looks.

“The cat’s out of the bag, isn’t it?”

“That’s why I told you so. Now it’s all ruined, geez.”

Alice snatched the just-finished wooden sword from my hands and deftly stuck it into the leather sheath with her hands hidden behind.

And with a hop towards Eugeo, she shouted out with a smile as brilliant as the sun.

“There are still three days to go… But Eugeo, happy birthday!!”

Eugeo’s large eyes turned round upon seeing the small sword of platinum oak kept in the sheath with a white dragon embroidery hurriedly presented to him.

“Eh… this, for me…? Something so amazing….?”

With the good parts snatched away by Alice, I explained with a crooked smile.

“Eugeo, you said that you broke the wooden sword your father bought for you, right? So… well, it might lose to a real one like the one your big brother has, but this one’s way better than any of those wooden swords the general store sells!”

Upon receiving the small swords with his outstretched, trembling hands, Eugeo bended over as though surprised by its weight and next, showed a huge smile that wouldn’t lose to Alice.

“You’re right… this is even heavier than my brother’s sword! Wow… I…. I’ll cherish it. Thank you, both of you. I’m so happy… it’s the first time a birthday present made me so happy…”

“H… hey, don’t cry!”

I shouted out in a fluster, spotting something small shining at the corners of Eugeo’s eyes.

I’m not crying; Eugeo swiped at his face and looked straight at me.

And smiled yet again.

That smile suddenly plunged into iridescent light.

An abrupt, suffocating pain in my chest. Intense nostalgia and loss beyond what I could handle. My tears flowed uncontrollably and streamed over my cheeks.

Alice and Eugeo who stood side-by-side, too, cried with their smiles still on—

We spoke, all together.

“We… the three of us had definitely lived through the same times.”

“We might part here… but still, these memories will remain forever.”

“They will… live on forever inside you. So, look—”

And the scene blanketed with sunlight streamed through the trees vanished and I was once again brought back to the top floor of the Central Cathedral.

“So, look—don’t cry, Kirito.”

Strength left Eugeo’s hands after his whisper; his right hand fell on the floor and his left, on his chest. The prism in his palm had also ceased its flickering as well.

The scene I relived through the screen in my mind was unmistakably one from my memories. I could recall no more than that one moment, but still, the fact that Alice, Eugeo, and I had grew

up from young together and were bosom friends, connected by unshakable bonds, filled my body with warmth and eased the pain of loss just a little.

“Yeah… those memories are right here.”

I pressed the fingers on my left hand against my chest and whispered with a sob.

“They will remain here forever.”

“That’s right… so, we are, best friends, forever. Where are you… Kirito, where did you go…”

The light in his eyes faded as they wandered and Eugeo called out my name with that smile still on his face.

I leaned myself forward and encircled Eugeo’s head with my left hand. My spilled tears trickled onto Eugeo, one after another.

“I’m here, right here.”

“Yeah…”

Gazing somewhere far away, Eugeo showed a contented smile.

“I see you… Shining brightly, in this darkness… Just like a star… a star in, the night sky… like I had, seen every night, on my own… under the Gigas Cedar… Shining just like… your sword…… Kirito……”

Gradually losing its luster, Eugeo’s voice gently shook my soul.

“That’s it… Kirito, your black sword…… «Night Sky Sword»…… would be a good name. What do you think……?”

“Yeah… sounds great. Thanks, Eugeo.”

I hugged my friend tight as he steadily grew lighter. His final words rippled through our connected minds like a drop falling onto a surface of water.

“Wrap this…… tiny world up…… gently… like the…… night sky……”

The clear teardrops built up at his eyelashes vanished as beads of light.

With his slight weight resting on my arm, Eugeo’s eyelids gently shut.

Eugeo stood in a dark corridor unknown to him.

However, he was not alone.

Gripping firmly onto his left hand was Alice, smiling, in a blue dress.

With just a little strength in his grip, Eugeo talked to his female childhood friend.

“This is… all for the best, isn’t it?”

The large ribbon binding Alice’s blonde hair shook and she gave a resolute nod.

“Yes. Let’s leave the rest to those two. I’m sure they will lead this world to how it should be.”

“I guess you’re right. Well… shall we go?”

“Let’s.”

Though he didn’t know when it happened, Eugeo had turned young as well. With his hand strongly holding and held by that of a girl at the same age and height, Eugeo began walking towards a white light visible on the far end of the corridor.

In that moment—

The durability of the human unit assigned the ID, NND7-6361, became zero.

Receiving that signal, the programs controlling the Light Cube Cluster issued a command to the light cube storing the corresponding fluct light.

Accepting the command, the interface diligently reset the linked praseodymium crystal structure.

The hundred and tens of millions of photon qubits stored within left behind one final sparkle and diffused—

The soul named Eugeo that had not even lived a subjective twenty years was eternally deallocated from the small cube.

At nearly the same time.

Another cube, stored quite a distance away from Eugeo’s light cube, performed the same operation.

The fluct light, in possesssion of the memories separated from a soul named Alice Schuberg, produced through irregular methods was also deallocated from its crystal cage.

No one yet knew where the collection of photons that formed the two souls would go.

7

I stayed there, on my knees, until Eugeo's body and Alice's memory fragment resting on his chest turned into grains of lead and vanished like Cardinal's corpse.

How long had it been?

The isolated space undulating beyond the glass windows was gone by the time I noticed and the sky filled with stars had returned. A faint violet dawn approached from the far-away mountain range at the edge stretching across the eastern horizon.

Deprived of nearly all ability to think, I unsteadily picked myself up and draw closer to Knight Alice who lay down a distance away.

Alice's injuries were terrible too. But luckily, most of the damage was burns with barely any bleeding, so any continuous drop in Life should have ceased. I lifted her up with my left hand and she did not regain her consciousness, but her eyebrows moved slightly while a thin breath left her lips.

Carrying Alice, I slowly, slowly walked towards the north end of the hall.

The crystal system terminal was all that remained undamaged now and it let out a mechanical flicker as it greeted me.

Gently laying Alice onto the floor, I tapped a single translucent key with a finger on my left hand. The monitor lit up, displaying a complex administration screen.

The user interface was mainly in the Sacred Tongue, no, English, but I eventually found what I sought after touching the screen several times.

External observer call.

I stared at the tab given that name for a while.

Observer. Those who made this world, set it into motion, and watched over it.

They, the staff members of the venture company, Rath, in other words, had told me only a single lie—but it was one that was far too heavy.

June, 2026, in the real world felt so long ago. Then, I had participated as a tester for an extended continuous operation experiment for the next-generation full-dive machine, the «Soul TransLator», developed by Rath.

The test took place over three consecutive days. Through the STL's Fluct Light Acceleration functionality, I had spent ten days, roughly 3.3 times what had passed in the real world, in a VR world for that test and had my memories blocked to ensure confidentiality. That was how those from Rath had explained it to me.

But that was a lie. Where I had dived into during that test was not exclusively for that test, but this Underworld where I was in right now. And ten days hardly matched up to how long I had spent in there. It was probably over three hundred times… likely over ten years' worth of time.

Yes. In those three days of the test, I had experienced childhood for the second time until eleven years old in a small village at the northern edge of the Human World. Playing until my childhood friends, that flaxen-haired boy and that blonde-haired girl, and I were covered in mud and returning to the village through the riverside path when it became evening, walking side-by-side, every single day.

That evening scene I saw at the river in the forest right after waking up in this world two years ago. The sense that Eugeo and I had messed around with swords as fellow children when I fought Eugeo. And the one act involving the platinum oak sword that came to me just a moment ago when Eugeo was on the verge of losing his life; that was no hallucination.

A fragment of memory I had surely experienced, erased. I had grown up in Rulid Village with Eugeo, and Alice as well, and I had forgotten about that until today.

Likewise, Eugeo and Alice lived on with the memories of us growing up erased. That might have been the reason why the pair did not completely lose their sense of self like the other integrity knights when synthesized.

I did not care why did Rath mix me, an outsider, into this civilization simulation now that it was all in the past. But there was something I couldn't possibly overlook.

There, when the young Alice was being taken away by Integrity Knight Deusolbert.

Eugeo had continued blaming himself for that long period of time. He continued lamenting how he could not save Alice. Originally, I should have borne half of that regret. But I had to go and forget about the past… not noticing the depth of Eugeo's suffering until the moment he sacrificed his own life……

"U… ug… gh…!"

A queer noise leaked out from my throat. My back molars violently grinded against each other with as much strength as I could muster.

Lifting my stiff left hand, I touched the button to call the observer with a trembling finger.

A dialog in Japanese was displayed with a warning tone when I did.

[When this operation is executed, the Fluct Light Acceleration rate will be fixed at 1.0. Are you sure?]

I pressed the OK button without any hesitation.

It felt like the air turned more viscous all of a sudden.

Sound, light, and everything else stretched out into the distance before giving chase and returning. A strange sensation assailed me for an instant, like my own movement and even thoughts were in extreme slow motion, and faded before I could react.

A single black window opened up in the middle of the screen. A sound level meter was displayed in the middle with the words, “SOUND ONLY”, blinking above it.

The rainbow-colored meter jolted up.

Followed by a steep increase. Mechanical noise reached my ears at that same time.

A sound from the real world, I thought.

The world of «the other side» with its repeating peaceful days with absolutely no relation to the state of the Underworld. The real world with blood, pain, and death being nothing more than a rare occurrence.

With the tempest of intense emotions deep in myself that I had somehow kept in check welling up, I trembled.

Drawing my face closer to the terminal, I shouted out the name of the man who had brought me to the Underworld as loud as I could.

“Kikuoka… can you hear me, Kikuoka?!!”

If this hand of mine could reach Kikuoka Seijirou or any of the other administrators right now, I might actually strangle that person to death.

Slamming my left fist trembling with no target for my rage into the marble table, I shouted once again.

“Kikuokaaaa!!!”

Immediately—some sort of sound streamed out from the screen.

It wasn't one from a human. Katatata, katatatata; crisp plosive sounds.

What came to mind straight away was the sound of a submachine gun on rapid-fire I heard in a VRMMO game called Gun Gale Online, something from years ago. But on the other side of this screen should have been a research facility of a small venture company. Why would there be such a sound?

I stood still and my ears caught human's voices this time… a tense exchange of yells.

[—gative, the intruders occupied path A6! We're retreating!!]

[A7, return fire somehow! Stall them until we lock down the system!!]

Once again, the sound of gunfire. Along with sporadic explosions mixed in.

What—is this?

A movie…? Did it pick up the audio from some streamed movie the staff members were watching in the research room?

But then, the unfamiliar voice called out a name I knew.

[Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka, we're at our limit! We have to abandon the main-con and shut the pressure-resistant barrier!!"

A pointed, rusty voice answered.

[Sorry, hold on for another two minutes! We can't let them take this place now!!]

Kikuoka—Seijirou, The man who brought me into this world.

I had never heard his voice this strained. What exactly was happening beyond the screen?

—Could they be under attack? Rath? But why…?

And once again, Kikuoka's voice came.

[Higa-kun, isn't it locked down yet!?]

I recalled the voice replying too. Higa Takeru, a researcher in Rath who was present at my test dive.

['nother eight… no, seven secs… —Aa…… aaaahh!?"

Higa's voice screeched as though shocked at something.

[Kiku-sann!! Someone's calling from inside! No, from inside Underworld!! This... aaahh, it's him, it's Kirigaya-kunn!!]

[Wha... whaat!?]

Footsteps running in. The mic jerked as someone grabbed it.

[Kirito-kun, you there!? Are you there!?]

This was definitely Kikuoka Seijirou. Pushing aside my hesitation, I shouted.

“That’s right! Listen here, Kikuoka… you… you damned…!”

[I'll take on all the criticism you got later! Listen to me now!!]

I couldn’t help but to shut my mouth at this desperation that didn’t suit him at all.

[Listen... Kirito-kun, search for a girl called Alice! And then...]

“Search for… she’s right here!”

I shouted back and Kikuoka instantly turned silent this time round. Following, he sounded agitated as—

[I-I can't believe it... it's a miracle! Ri... right, the moment this transmission cuts off, I'll return the FLA to one thousand times, so take Alice and head for the «*World End Altar*»! The internal console you're using now is linked to this main console, but this place's going down!]

“Going down… wait, just what…”

[Sorry, no time to explain! Listen, the *Altar* is straight south after you exit the eastern large gate...]

At that time, the first voice I heard echoed out from point-blank range.

[Lieutenant Colonel, we shut down A7's barrier, but a few minutes' our... no, aah, damn it! It looks like they're starting to cut off the main electric wiring!!]

[Eeehh, they can't, that'll be real bad!!]

The reply wasn’t Kikuoka’s, but a shrill scream from Higa.

“Kiku-sann, cutting off the main electric wiring now will cause a surge! The Light cube Cluster’s safe… but there’ll be a spike at the sub-con where Kirigaya-kun’s STL is… it’ll fry his fluct light!!]

[What... that's ridiculous, there are tons of safety limiters on the STL...]

[We cut off all of those! He's undergoing treatment right now!!]

What exactly were they saying?

What would happen to my fluct light if the electricity died?

The one who broke the fraction of a second of silence was Kikuoka once again.

[I'll lock this place down! Higa-kun, you get Professor Koujiro and Asuna-kun, retreat to the upper shaft, and keep Kirito-kun safe!!]

[B-But what about Alice!?]

[I'll up the FLA rate to its limit!! We'll think about the rest later, his safety's the...]

I barely caught any of the continuing exchange of shouts.

A single name in Kikuoka's words pounded against my consciousness and shook it like a storm.

—Asu… na?

—Asuna's there? In Rath…? But why would she?

My face drew closer to the terminal to ask Kikuoka that question.

But it happened a moment before my voice came out. The owner of the first voice I heard screamed out in anguish.

[No... the power's cut!! The propeller's stopping, all hands, brace for impact!!]

And—

I saw something strange.

Pillars of white light silently soaring down from the skies far above, stabbing through the cathedral's canopy.

There was no pain, no impact, no sensation whatsoever.

But even so, I knew that I had received damage so serious I couldn't recover from it. The light pierced straight through my soul itself, rather than my flesh… it seemed like that.

Something that defined my existence, something precious, was torn to shreds and began to disappear.

Time, space, and even my memories dissolved into a hollow, blank whiteness.

I—

Made no sense of even those words.

I heard a voice from somewhere, somewhere far away, a moment before I was robbed of my ability to think.

[Kirito-kun... Kirito-kun!!]

It had a ring so nostalgic, it made me want to cry; a ring so dear I almost went mad.

That was——

——Whose voice, I wonder…?

(To Be Continued)

Afterword

Hello, everyone. Thank you very much for reading “Sword Art Online 14 Alicization Uniting”.

The Alicization arc that had continued from “Beginning” → “Running” → “Turning” → “Rising” → “Dividing” ends a chapter in the tale with this volume.

In a meeting about SAO’s publication with the editor-in-charge around the end of 2009, I recall us saying “Let’s set publishing the Alicization arc as our goal”. It didn’t feel real back then since it was so far ahead, but by the time I noticed, we’ve already gotten to the end of the Human World chapter, so time (and the number of volumes) certainly do pile up really fast…

Well. Eugeo who had stayed as Kirito’s partner and close friend as well as the other main character from the ninth to this fourteenth volume has parted from the stage of this story at last. He’s rare in this series: a main character that doesn’t assert his own presence much; he leaves the impression that he was chasing after Kirito throughout the entire long adventure, where he left his home village, entered the capital’s academy only to get arrested, before escaping from there and climbing the tower.

Actually, while revising the web edition for the paperback edition, I seriously considered altering Eugeo’s fate. Eugeo withdrew from the stage while stifling himself the entire time in the web edition, so I thought it would be fine if he got hold of a new fate since I was given this chance to rewrite it.

However, it didn’t happen in the end. When I reached «that scene» in my revision, I just couldn’t overwrite the original story. It was as if Eugeo himself was denying any change to his fate. Or perhaps that was his final and greatest assertion after holding himself back the rest of the time.

I did write «Human World chapter» earlier; the Alicization arc will still continue for a little more, extending its stage farther. The familiar characters from the reality side will be reappearing one after another, so I hope for your support from now on too!

I think it will be already announced by the time this book is stacked in the stores, but the broadcast for the television animated series, “Sword Art Online II”, will finally begin in July. Please take a look at that too! And my delay with the manuscript had caused many problems for the illustrator, abec-san, and the one in charge, Miki-san, this time as well. I’ll try my best… next volume…!

A Certain Day in March, 2014 Kawahara Reki

Credits

- Translation – **Tap**
- PDF Encoding – **arceus625**

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